


EDGE
INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
#327
JANUARY 2019


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THE INSIDE STORY OF SWITCH'S STUNNING SUCCESS
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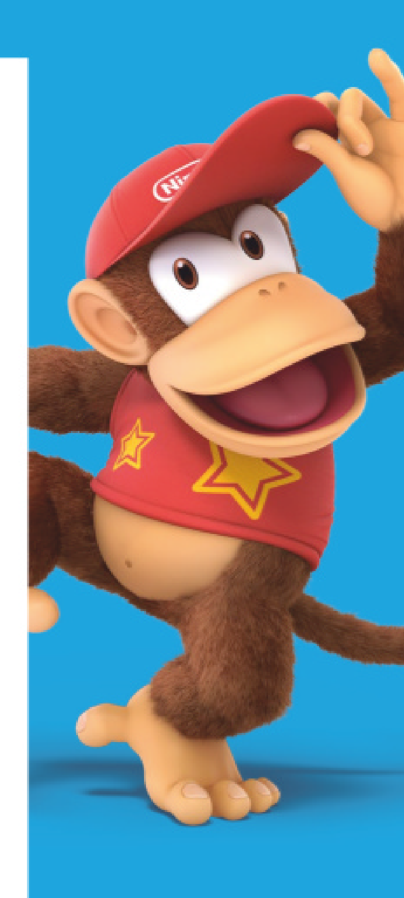
We're all connected in this world, don't you forget it

You might not have noticed, but the outside world isn't a great place to be at the moment – and not just because of the short days and too-early mornings we expect at this time of year. Games and winters have long gone hand in hand, but with so much bile and disorder out there, there's never been a better reason to stop indoors with the curtains closed.

Games aren't just about escapism, however. They are also about healing, and there's a positive, restorative air to our latest issue. It's perhaps most obvious in *Tetris Effect*, which we belatedly review this month. Tetsuya Mizuguchi's latest is a relaxing, cleansing experience that makes you feel a little more positive about the world and your place within it. We also catch up with Yoshiro Kimura, head of Onion Games, maker of the maddest games to come out of Japan in some time. He decided to go it alone as an indie after the Tohoku earthquake left him feeling helpless about how he might make the world better through his work.

This is a medium that's easy to be cynical about – and indeed, we are often right to be. But perhaps, with everything that's going on, we should all seek to celebrate games a little more. We could all be a little more like Day Of The Devs, the annual indie festival that we visit this month. It brings together dozens of excellent games, charges developers nothing, and then lets the people of San Francisco play all day for free.

If it's a celebration of games and all they can offer us you want, though, look no further than Nintendo. This month we dig into how, in the space of 18 months, Switch has come to embody all that is good about today's game industry. And we review *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*, a game that began as a celebration of Nintendo's IP portfolio, but is now a love letter to the medium as a whole, borrowing and riffing on a host of big names and cult classics, creator Masahiro Sakurai exploiting his deep knowledge of games to the fullest. It's impossible to play without smiling, but if it's all the same to you, we'll keep the curtains closed. It's bloody Arctic out there.



games

Hype

Play



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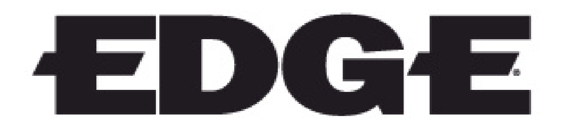
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Reality bites

Sales are struggling, execs are jumping ship and investors aren't convinced. Has the VR bubble burst already?

Perhaps, in hindsight, Brendan Iribe was always meant to leave Oculus. The co-founder and one-time CEO of the company that sparked virtual reality's return has enjoyed a successful career, sure – but it's one that's been spent building up companies into perfect acquisition material, then walking once the deal's done. He was a co-founder of Scaleform, the game UI middleware bought by Autodesk in 2011. From there he went to Gaikai, the cloud-streaming game technology Sony snapped up to lay the foundations for PlayStation Now. Iribe left Oculus in November, having been around since its inception in 2012. The cynic might wonder why he stuck it out for so long: Facebook's $2.3 billion acquisition of Oculus completed in the summer of 2014.

But it was not a big cheque that prompted Iribe to walk out on Oculus. He'd already taken a de facto demotion on the chin, having been bumped from the CEO's office in 2016 to head up a new Oculus division dedicated to PC-based VR. According to reports, the straw that broke the camel's back for Iribe was the cancellation of the planned Rift 2, a powerful next-generation headset that would push the envelope for top-end VR. Since the acquisition, Facebook's gaze has understandably shifted towards mobile hardware (such as the Oculus Go, a £250 headset released in May). This was always on the cards: Mark Zuckerberg surely never expected to recoup his staggering investment purely through the sales of powerful videogame hardware. Yet that rapid reassessment of Oculus' priorities – turning PC-based VR first into a sideline, then a footnote – tells you all you need to know about Iribe's decision to walk.

It also tells you everything about the current, confused state of virtual reality. No doubt Palmer Luckey, who dreamed up Rift and knocked together the first prototype in his garage, knew VR wasn't going to become a massmarket sensation overnight. Yet over the two-and-a-half years since the first Rift headset released to consumers, progress has been slow. In the absence of any official figures – which in itself is never a good sign – analysts have found out what they can by other means.

One such investigation found that the major HMD manufacturers were selling around 100,000 units per quarter. Another, which used Amazon API data to show that sales of all kinds of VR hardware had slumped, drew a stroppy response from HTC. Sales had fallen, the Vive maker said, in large part because Google and Oculus had inflated the market with their low-cost, poor-quality offerings, Cardboard and Gear VR. Vive sales, however, had been so good for so long that HTC had run out of stock. Conveniently, it declined to provide any figures to support the claim. Great stuff worthy of a White House press conference, though not exactly helpful to those who want to see VR succeed. So, what's with the hold up?

At the core of it is the very reason Facebook paid so much for Oculus. VR could, and should, be absolutely enormous. Its potential impact spreads far beyond videogames into enterprise, education, healthcare and beyond, and could truly be world-changing. Yet each of VR's prospective markets requires a bespoke solution. VR games require powerful hardware, precise tracking and minimal latency. Classroom VR needs to be hard-wearing and affordable. Enterprise will demand a sleek, unembarrassing design for the boardroom or conference hall, the sort of thing neither game developers nor teachers will give a fig about. And all, naturally, will need different kinds of software. Ironically for a device that sits so close to the wearer's eyes, VR's most painful enduring problem is a lack of focus.

> Its potential impact spreads far beyond games, yet each of VR's prospective markets requires a bespoke solution

With that in mind, the initial drive towards cheap and cheerful smartphone-driven HMDs such as Gear VR and Google Cardboard is understandable. But it hasn't worked. It makes a reasonable first impression that's quickly undone by a lack of fidelity and, moreover, content – the latter further undermined by the smartphone user's expectation that everything should be free, and then even further by the ▶



JUMP BACK
As the years have rolled by and VR has failed to live up to Palmer Luckey's early promises, AR has either joined or replaced it as where pundits claim the exciting things are *really* happening. At the vanguard of the augmented-reality movement is Magic Leap One, a much-fancied AR headset whose processing oomph is provided by a small but weighty PC that clips to your trouser pocket. While Magic Leap has assembled an enviable array of talent, including former Apple games guru Graeme Devine, One is still a work in progress: early adopters will have to cough up $2,500 for a developer unit. A brief session suggests there is little to justify the price tag. And there are already signs of the wheels coming off. The firm is bidding, alongside Microsoft, for the contract to build what the US Army calls HUD 3.0 – which will "increase lethality by enhancing the ability to detect, decide and engage before the enemy." Erm, cool?



Oculus Go is now the company's entry-level headset, though its best seller remains Gear VR, which was powered by – and bundled with, for a time – Samsung phones

various players' attempts to build their own software ecosystems, selling games and apps through their own stores on their own terms. If you bought the other guy's hardware then, well, tough luck.

That's a problem at the premium end of the market, too, though the bigger factor here is price. We send to press on the eve of Black Friday, and in the run-up to the most important day on the modern salesperson's calendar, an excitable email arrives from HTC about a £200 discount on the top-of-the-line Vive Pro Full Kit, which bundles the latest headset model with two base stations and a pair of controllers. It's never been cheaper, we're told. It costs £1,099, and that's before you think about the PC you need to run it.

Progress doesn't come cheap, sure. Yet even for those able to afford it, the Vive Pro's merits are questionable. While the wireless adapter introduced this year goes some way to addressing the faff and clutter that still makes setting up the **Edge** game room for a VR review a chore, it does not entirely eliminate it. And while the Pro is certainly more powerful than its predecessor, no exclusive games have been built for it – all you're left with is the same games you had before, only in higher resolution. Vive was always aimed at the higher end of the VR audience; Vive Pro is aimed at the subset of them who, two years in, are prepared to pay up for a slight upgrade. The mass market hardly beckons.

All, however, is far from lost, and much of our continued, if cautious, optimism for VR's future lies in the main players' understanding that they are still in the early stages of a long game. While it might not be the all-singing, all-dancing, high-end headset Iribe wanted Oculus to make, the company's forthcoming Quest HMD represents a major step forward for consumer VR. Due for release next spring, it's not tremendously powerful, but it's no weakling either – Oculus CTO John Carmack compares its processing grunt to Xbox 360 and PS3. Yet all that power is on board, with no need for an external PC. And crucially, it is the first Oculus headset to use Insight, the name the company has given its proprietary markerless inside-out tracking system. Inside-out uses outward-facing cameras mounted on the headset to let it both parse the space around it and identify its place within it, removing the need for external sensors or even a defined playing field. A demo of *Superhot VR* at the recent Oculus Connect conference was playable in a space the size of a double garage. Once the wires and the boundaries fade away, VR should start to feel like less of a novelty.

The biggest cause for optimism about VR gaming comes from the company we least expected to define it

Yet the biggest cause for optimism about the future of VR gaming comes from the company we least expected to define it. Sony has, to put it mildly, a track record of hopping on seemingly lucrative bandwagons, then abandoning them the moment it feels like the wheels might be about to come off. Sales of three million or so units might not be much to shout about, but the company is focusing hard on PSVR this winter. A hardware refresh cut back on cabling, and added the HDR passthrough that the launch device (bafflingly) lacked, without a price increase. As an aggressive TV advertising campaign makes clear, the games are starting to come: the beguiling platforming of *Astro Bot Rescue Mission*, the intoxicating club-night puzzling of *Tetris Effect*, the action-flick fantasy of *Blood & Truth*, and increasingly more besides.

Sony enjoys a luxury few of the VR space's other players can. To a multinational tech company enjoying a runaway lead in the console arms race, VR is a relatively cheap experiment that can afford to fail. The PSVR project will not have cost Sony anything like the billions Facebook spent on the promise of Oculus. A *God Of War* or *Last Of Us Part II* will likely run Sony over $100 million by the time it has been made, put on shelves and marketed; an *Astro Bot* or *Blood & Truth* will not. Crucially, PSVR to Sony is intended for playing games on, and for that alone. If it ends up in a classroom, boardroom or operating theatre then fine, but that is not what it is built for. Affordable, well supported and with a rare clarity of purpose, PSVR is the only current virtual reality offering that feels even close to essential. In time, perhaps the other companies will follow suit. First, they must learn how to focus. ■





Rift, Vive Pro (top) and PlayStation VR (above) are the mainstream gaming options, but Valve is rumoured to be joining the foray with an inside-out HMD of its own

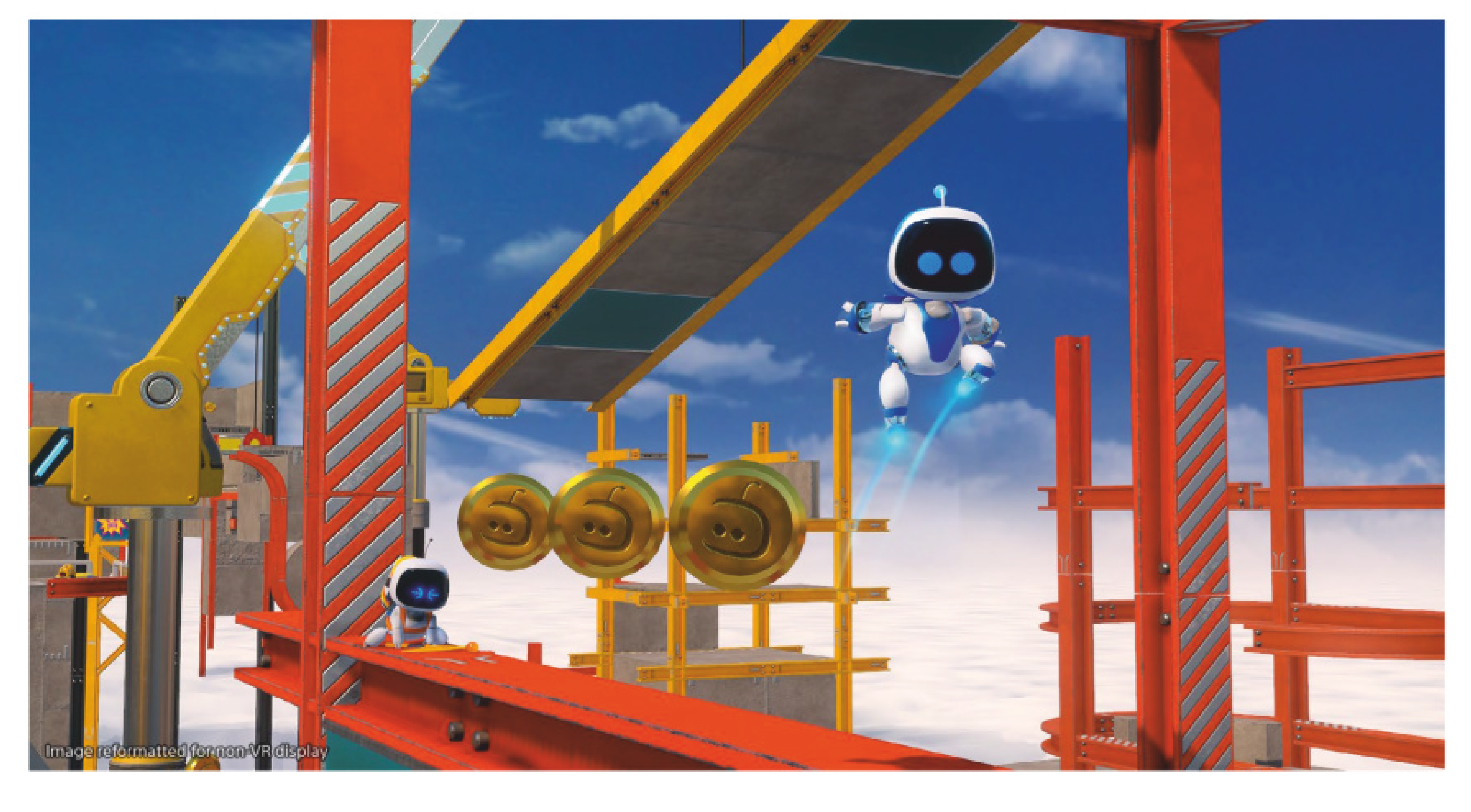
Budget Cuts' 2016 demo was the first Vive game we fell in love with. It remains one of the few true VR essentials



PSVR games can be playable with or without the headset, dramatically increasing their sales potential. It's paid dividends for Tetsuya Mizuguchi's *Tetris Effect* (above). *Astro Bot Rescue Mission* (below) may be VR-only, but it's PSVR's best exclusive to date



Echo Combat is the latest addition to *Echo VR*, an ever-expanding Rift hub made by *The Order: 1886* developer Ready At Dawn



A better tomorrow

Microsoft heads to XO18 to celebrate Xbox One – but reveals its gaze is fixed on the future

Fortnite may be the biggest game on the planet right now, but surely there were better ways to open an Xbox livestream than with a montage piece of various people in freefall. Optics are everything, after all, and this was, we assume quite unintentionally, a bit on the nose. Still, Microsoft will feel like it left this event having stuck the landing. Insofar as the company has ever had a coherent set of goals for Xbox One, it at least had a core message here, and it drummed it in relentlessly. You could sum it up in two words, were it not repeated so often. Game Pass, Game Pass, Game Pass.

Notionally the first event of its kind, XO18 was in fact a rebadging of the Xbox Fanfest in Mexico City, which has been running since 2014. It's easy to see why Phil Spencer and crew are drawn back here year after year, and it's not just because of Spencer's belief that Latin America is a real growth opportunity for Xbox. No, the real draw is the crowd. They come, shall we say, to party.

The presenters – Inside Xbox stalwarts including Graeme 'AceyBongos' Boyd, Julia Hardy and Larry 'Major Nelson' Hryb – were rapturously received. Whenever Spencer was on camera the masses chanted his name. Matt Booty, the wondrously named head of Microsoft Studios who was the day's headline act, his announcement of two new acquisitions trailed repeatedly throughout the show, was eventually welcomed as if a god. Like an ailing demagogue holding rallies to boost his fragile ego, XO18 gave Microsoft a break from the harsh realities of a generation it has long since lost. A place where thronged masses chant your name with evangelical fervour, and the most mundane of announcements is met with a cacophony of noise.

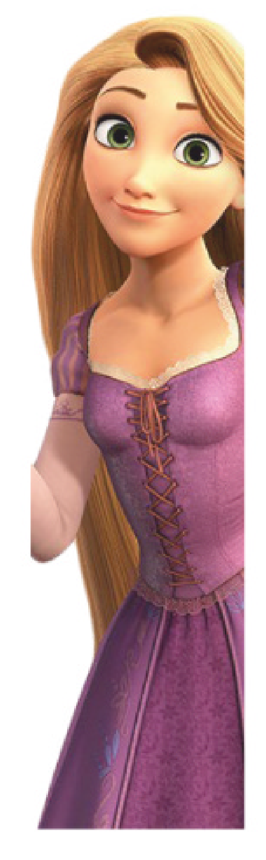
And we do mean mundane. Sixteen new additions to the Game Pass subscription service were the backbone of the show, announced two or three at a time in between VT pieces and on-stage interviews. Few of the titles unveiled would have had non-believers scrambling for their credit cards, but the games themselves were not really the point. Game Pass itself is.

There is logic to this. Spencer's claim that Game Pass introduces players to games they might otherwise ignore ("We want as many kinds of games to be successful as possible") certainly holds water, but Microsoft's obsession with subscriptions is about more than that. With the current generation clearly lost, the company is instead focusing on building an ecosystem and a customer base that is portable.

> Sixteen new additions to the Game Pass subscription service were the backbone of the show

The rumour mill indicates that Microsoft will be first out of the blocks, announcing a new console at E3 2019 and releasing it before the year is out (we hear Sony is keeping its powder dry until 2020). Backwards compatibility has been one of Microsoft's few true success stories this generation, and so it is unthinkable that Xbox One games will not be compatible with the console's successor. Using the fag-end of a difficult generation to lay the foundations for the next is smart thinking, even if it doesn't make for much of a show.

At times it made for a maddening one, in fact. Hryb wheeled out his Crazy Larry alter ego, a cheeky local-TV salesman character that has apparently been a thing since the 360 days, to announce some Black Friday game discounts. Then he reminded us, lest we'd somehow forgotten, that your first month of Game Pass now costs a dollar. Yes, you could get *Sea Of Thieves* for half off. But remember! Every single firstparty Xbox game launches day and date on our subscription service, so ignore all that other stuff we just said.



Elsewhere this was, like E3, the work of a company treading water while waiting for the next-gen rescue helicopter. There was news of updates to *State Of Decay 2* and *Sea Of Thieves*. There was a welcome reminder that *Crackdown 3* is a thing that exists: on stage to discuss its cloud-powered online features, Joe Staten was visibly blindsided by the cheer that met his use of the phrase "It's multiplayer, the *Crackdown* way". Microsoft squeezed one final round of headlines out of *PUBG* before the end of its console exclusivity (it'll be on PS4 by the time you read this) by adding it to, yep, Game Pass.

And of course there were the acquisitions. The additions of Inxile Entertainment and Obsidian are savvy indeed, the former bringing considerable CRPG kudos and the latter a particularly tempting prospect, since it has always felt as if the only thing holding Obsidian back from true greatness is money and support from an understanding publisher. It will be years, no doubt, before we see the first fruits of either deal. But that's just fine for Microsoft, which knew long ago the current-gen jig was up and has been building towards a brighter future ever since. If it pays off, it will no longer need to decamp to Mexico to be cheered to the high heavens. ■



***Kingdom Hearts III* – in development for over a decade – was billed as an exclusive reveal thanks to the new Winnie The Pooh world**



***Crackdown 3*'s multiplayer has been a troubling absence from the convention circuit. Its Azure-powered destruction looks as intriguing as ever**



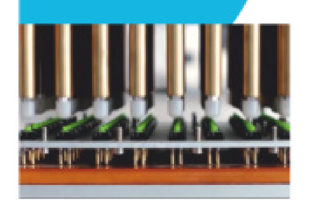


The din was deafening, and visibly impacted the Inside Xbox team and their interviewees. One wonders why they weren't better prepared given Microsoft has been coming to Mexico for years



MK DONS

Is console mouse and keyboard play more trouble than it's worth?



Microsoft announced in September that mouse and keyboard support was coming to Xbox, and XO18 brought more details on a feature that went live as part of a November system update. While you can use your own peripherals, Razer has signed up as the initiative's official partner, and will support the new dynamic lighting feature. Only a few games offer support at launch: one is *Fortnite*, which swerves the obvious concern about balance by putting mouse-and-keyboard players in a separate matchmaking queue. Easy enough for the biggest game on the planet, but whether other developers will risk splitting already small online userbases remains to be seen.

State of the Onion

Yoshiro Kimura peels back the layers of his studio's wonderfully eccentric catalogue

Before he founded Onion Games in 2012, **Yoshiro Kimura** felt lost, a man "without a cause". He'd left Grasshopper Manufacture, after producing Suda 51's *No More Heroes* and its sequel and directing the wonderful *Little King's Story*. And with the Tohoku earthquake still fresh in his mind, Kimura found himself thinking about his career. "Games didn't seem to play a part in helping humanity, in helping Japan rebuild," he says. Meanwhile, the industry he loved seemed to be increasingly focused on social games, and that just wasn't Kimura at all. He wasn't sure where to go or what to do.

The turning point came during a trip to San Francisco to attend 2012's Independent Games Festival. Kimura looked up at a huge screen, showcasing a whole host of indie games, and found himself transfixed – and then, suddenly, inspired. "It was almost as if the screen itself was talking to me, saying, 'Hey, Kimura. There's all this possibility out here. What do you want to do?'"

He drew upon his feelings and frustrations, and poured them into three ideas. The first was puzzle game *Million Onion Hotel*, with its story set on an island that appears after Japan has sunk beneath the sea following a huge earthquake. Then came *Dandy Dungeon*, a semi-autobiographical tale of a middle-aged man, Yamada, who quits his job at a large game company to become a bedroom coder, tapping away at a keyboard in his underpants. "I imagined if I was this really talented programmer, maybe I could be like Yamada," he says, before adding with an impish chuckle, "Although naked."

The third was *Black Bird*, which took inspiration from the games Kimura was playing at the time. As a friend of ZUN, maker of *The Touhou Project* series of bullet-hell shooters, Kimura saw potential in flipping the idea of one character against impossible odds, imagining a "typhoon, tearing through all these enemies". *Black Bird*, he says, represents a natural disaster: "It was a way of turning the tables, in terms of how I was thinking about the earthquake."

The studio became a work-for-hire outlet until it had earned enough to start work on *Million Onion Hotel*. Then publisher DMM expressed an interest in *Dandy Dungeon*, and development temporarily shifted to that game instead. With *Black Bird* now out on PC and Switch, Onion Games has launched all three games within 18 months, having grown from three to ten employees. After that early rush of creative inspiration, these days Kimura takes his time thinking up new concepts.

> "There's not much I can do. If they don't sell, we may have to rethink how we should be making games"

Kimura's tastes tend towards older games, though he doesn't think of them as 'retro', seizing upon a moment when his translator pauses to say "traditional" in English. He prefers studying games with unusual concepts; "Games that weren't quite what we would think of now as complete or polished, but that had something there. I like thinking how I would remake them if I was to do it now." He's not seeking to create something brand new, in other words, rather to examine ideas he's enjoyed in the past and twist them a bit.

LITTLE IN JAPAN
Kimura notes an increased appetite in Japan for indie games lately, while acknowledging that the country's development scene is behind its western counterparts, despite events like Kyoto's annual BitSummit. His idiosyncratic posts on the Onion Games Twitter account have raised his own profile, while learning English (he understands most of our questions, though he answers in his first language) has helped him connect with western developers. Even so, he admits he has some way to go, self-mockingly parroting his translator when he suggests he's one of the few "comparatively better-known" Japanese indies. "I do spend a lot of time thinking about how we can break through – and through game design itself, without tailoring for a western audience," he says.



One way is through the studio's distinctive audiovisual style, with music in particular important to Kimura. A fan of prog rock, classical and opera, he often tries to match his game designs with specific musical genres. It's most apparent in *Black Bird*, with waves of enemies appearing in time with the score.

But there's plenty going on in all Kimura's games. *Million Onion Hotel* and *Black Bird* are deceptively simple ideas, with nuances to their scoring systems that make them rewarding to replay. None of this is explained, because Kimura isn't a fan of the trend towards excessive tutorialising. "When the player finds those other systems for themselves, that's part of the game – they're discovering something," he says.

He's concerned that people might not dig beneath the surface, citing reviews of *Million Onion Hotel* where players swiftly dismissed it. "There's not much I can really do about it," he says. "If they don't sell, we may have to rethink how we should be making games. But for me, this is the only way I *can* make games. So that might be the end of Onion Games!"

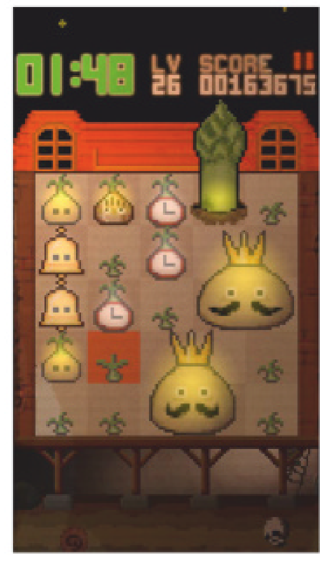
That seems unlikely. *Black Bird* mightn't have sold as well overseas as previous games, but it's been a success in Japan. It's a sign that whatever's next for Kimura, he's not prepared to make concessions. He roars with laughter when jokingly imagining a mobile version of *Black Bird* with gyro controls, saying he'd never port a game if he felt it would be compromised. Either way, he's no longer lost, but rather free to look forward. The tsunami has long gone. "There's this huge ocean of possibilities," he says. "I need to listen carefully to what my soul is saying, and work out which direction it's going to take." ■

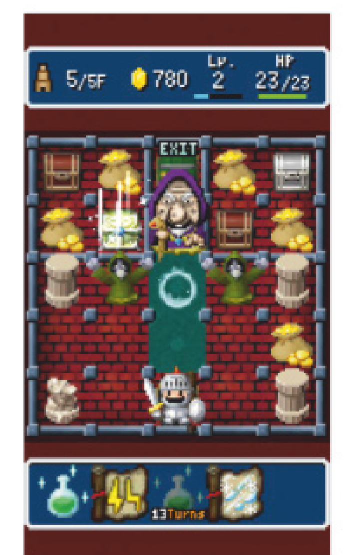
Million Onion Hotel's asparagus also shows up in *Black Bird*, and may well become a permanent fixture

Onion Games founder Yoshiro Kimura

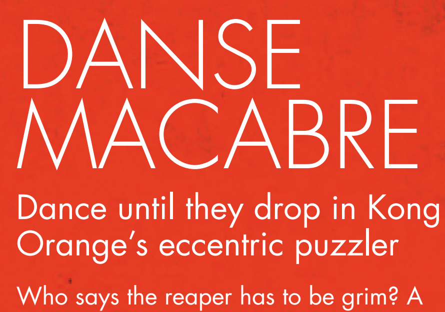








ABOVE ***Black Bird*** **was conceived alongside** ***Million Onion Hotel*** **and** ***Dandy Dungeon*****, but Kimura wanted to wait until the company was in a more stable position, with a more experienced team, to develop Onion Games' first console release.** LEFT **Kimura appreciates the faster turnaround that comes with working on smaller games. "Concentrating on the one project for a long period of time... that's not something I really enjoy that much"**



DANSE MACABRE

Dance until they drop in Kong Orange's eccentric puzzler

Who says the reaper has to be grim? A puzzle game in which you orchestrate fatal accidents by manipulating shadows and moving blocks, *Felix The Reaper* is about facing life's greatest inevitability with a spring in your step.

"Death is a rather depressing motive," art director **Mikkel Maltesen** says, "but I ended up with a design that made Felix friendly, unthreatening, and round. Our historian, Søren Hein, found a medieval text describing death as an office clerk, so we went with a combination of a grey and boring office clerk and a dancing death. Working as an agent of death is a conformal, stiff thing, so dancing is Felix's way to add colour to his trivial work." Get ready to shimmy your way through a morbid nine-to-five when *Felix The Reaper* struts onto PC, PS4, Switch and Xbox One in 2019. ■



Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"I have a project that I truly wish to solidify as my next challenge. I have decided to **leave my current position** and start my own business in order to achieve my goal."

Final Fantasy XV director **Hajime Tabata** quits Square Enix to make a game that's actually finishable



"You have been training for years and years to be where you are. Along the way, you have probably had to explain yourselves more than once, convincing people that you are **not wasting your time."**

Lars Løkke Rasmussen, PM of Denmark, is talking either about esports or making a magazine about videogames



"They love what they love and want what they want. That passion, **it's actually what drives us**, and we feel it too."

Blizzard's **Allen Adham** puts a positive spin on the miserable reception afforded to *Diablo Immortal*

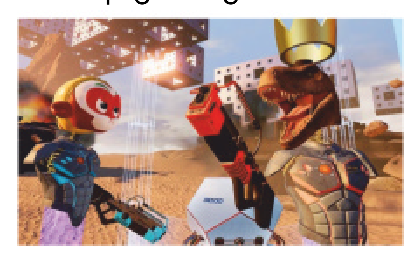
"We began our smart-device business as a way to get our characters and games into the hands of a larger audience, given that **smart devices have become prevalent** in a way that dedicated platforms simply cannot match."



New Nintendo president **Shuntaro Furukawa** shows Blizzard how to properly defend putting your biggest names on the App Store

ARCADE WATCH

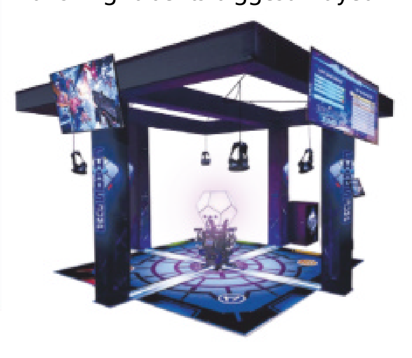
Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Chaos Jump
Manufacturer Minority Media

This is quite the volte face from Minority Media, the Montreal developer behind 2012 PSN game *Papo & Yo*. After discovering that puzzle adventure games about alcoholic parents are only ever going to be a niche proposition, the studio turned its attention to virtual reality. Its first release, *Time Machine VR*, was one of the very few early Rift games to clear $1 million in revenue. Its follow-up, *The Other Room*, tanked. Rather than follow that graph to its logical conclusion, the studio is pivoting again, this time to the arcade.

Chaos Jump itself isn't too exciting: it's a fourplayer action game in which you fight robots across 18 levels which are randomly generated each time. But *Chaos Jump* is notable for how it is played: on a bespoke, 12-square-foot arena that, unlike most VR attractions, is designed to be set up and used by customers, with no need for trained arcade staff. Vive Pro headsets dangle invitingly from overhead wires; games are kicked off through a central touchscreen interface. Leaderboard support drives competition between co-op partners, though versus modes are available. Perhaps the smartest inclusion is the pair of outward-facing, high-definition screens that show bystanders what's going on in the game, a key factor in the success of so many arcade games that VR attractions overlook. As the name implies, Minority Media knows it's operating in another niche, but this might be its biggest hit yet.



My Favourite Game
Yuri Lowenthal

The actor and voice of Marvel's Spider-Man on bringing theatre to games, and the magic of the text adventure

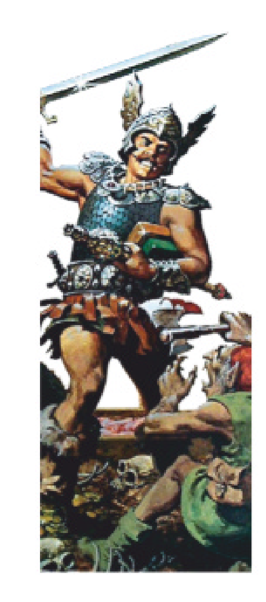
Yuri Lowenthal is an actor best known for his voice work in videogames. His career has included work in theatre, film and TV, and roles such as the Prince of Persia in *The Sands Of Time* and Yosuke in *Persona 4* – but these days, he's perhaps best known for voicing the web-slinging star of *Marvel's Spider-Man*. Here, Lowenthal discusses a dream role, an industry in flux and his ever-worsening skills with a controller.

What have you seen change in the game industry over the years as an actor?
There's been an increase in the amount of motion capture that is done with the actors who are also performing the voice roles. That's been exciting, because I come from a theatre background originally, and it's sort of like a return to theatre in a way. Normally, when I'm recording for videogames, I record solo. But when we're working on performance capture, it's a group event.

So what have you taken from theatre and screen work to your game work?
'Filmic' and 'cinematic' are two buzzwords that often come up when directors or casting directors are casting for or directing these projects. "We need to bring your performance down, we need to be more cinematic, more intimate". I definitely use that training from film and TV and theatre, I've brought that to videogames I think. I've had to.

How did *Spider-Man* differ from other roles that you've played?
Because I'm a comic-book nerd, it was a huge honour, a huge thrill – and also a very heavy weight, at first. I think there was a lot of trust in this one. There was the team's trust in me to do it, which I felt was a huge responsibility, and then there was me really trying to trust myself. To know that I didn't have to go and, you know, find a golden fleece or something so that I could do it. That I had it in me.

FOUND IN TRANSLATION
Lowenthal speaks Japanese, which sometimes proves useful in his work. "It's nice when they're playing the reference video, and I'm hearing the original Japanese performance, and I may have a little more insight into what's being said than other actors," he says. It's also useful for interacting with Japanese clients who attend sessions. "I used to let it be a surprise; but I found that it wasn't always a pleasant one. Because if they thought nobody could understand what they were saying when they were talking to each other, and realised at the end of the session that I could understand the whole time, it made them wonder, 'Oh, did we say anything that we shouldn't have?' So now I always establish it at the get-go by greeting them in Japanese."



Following the voice-actor's strike, do you feel that what needed to be achieved has been achieved?
I don't feel we got everything we might have asked for, or deserved, but I do feel that it was definitely a step in the right direction. It's going to be a matter of everybody staying on top of it, especially the vocal stress. I think the people who are hiring us are more aware of that, the people who are directing us are more aware of that.

> "When I started playing Spider-Man, I was glad nobody was watching me"

What's the worst voice-acting experience that you've had to go through?
Not so long ago, often there wouldn't be a vocal director – it would just be one of the devs. They just weren't aware of what a toll it could take. On some of these war-type games, I've done the same line 15, 20 times, and most of those were at a screaming level. Going back to my theatre training, one of the things they teach you is diaphragm control. But even with good training, some of these games after a while can just burn you out. There have been a couple of times where I felt like they really didn't care. But I think that's happening less and less.

Is playing games a prerequisite for being a good videogame voice actor?
I don't think so. I've worked with plenty of very talented actors who don't always understand how games work. I mean, to get to do this kind of work is really a dream come true. The only downside is that I've been so busy recently, trying to produce my own projects and be a father, and work, that I've had less time to play. And I've become a terrible videogame player of late! When I started playing *Spider-Man*, I was glad nobody was watching me, to be honest.

Have you found that having a child has affected how you play father-figure roles?
My heart has opened up in a way, and my emotions have opened up in a way, that was not accessible, I would argue, before I became a father. So I guess I have my son to thank for becoming a better actor. And it isn't limited to just father figure roles. I think it's everything I do.

Okay, then. What's your favourite game of all time?
I will always go back to text adventures; I was once obsessed with Dungeons & Dragons. And then I started playing *Zork*, which takes place in that fantasy type of universe. It fired up my imagination. So: *Zork*. If you had to go back to a game that I was involved in, it would be *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time*. Always. There was magic in that game. ■

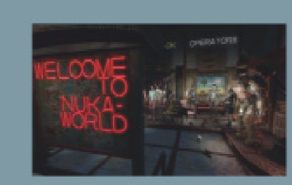


Different acting disciplines all share something fundamental. “I would say that all my acting comes from the same place,” Lowenthal says

DIY

Mini Controller Wheel
bit.ly/3Dprintwheel

While we appreciate that a large portion of our readership *aren't* trendy twentysomething San Franciscans with 3D printers next to their pasta machines, this controller-mounted, thumb-steered mini driving wheel is of note even if you don't have the facilities to fashion your own. If you do, however, pixel2's free download seems well worth a tinker. With the help of a skateboard bearing, a bit of superglue and a paper clip, you can rig the cleverly designed rack-and-pinion mechanism to your controller's sticks and steer your favourite *Forza Horizon 4* vehicles with finer control. It's not without its flaws – it'll block your D-pad, and scratch your paint job over time unless cushioned correctly. But it's a slick little piece of kit, and available ready-printed for cheap on Etsy if you're curious.



VIDEO

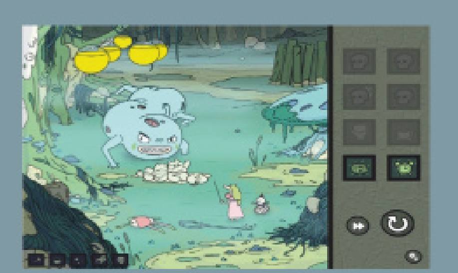
Commonwealth Military Museum Tour
bit.ly/f4museum

TheChiefCurator is a creator in his sixties who's spent a significant amount of his retirement building a staggeringly detailed Commonwealth Military museum in *Fallout 4*. Considering how wonky the base-building mechanics are, it's incredible how he's managed to use them so adeptly: mods have plenty to do with it, it seems, as does his keen eye for layout. Our tour guide does a wonderful job of walking us through the build – the commentary is a great primer on series lore. The enthusiasm and pride in his voice is a balm for the soul.

WEB GAME

Monstrüous
bit.ly/monstruousgame

The stuff of giddy childhood nightmares, *Monstrüous* is a delightfully creepy puzzle game. You control an intrepid adventuring party and attempt to vanquish a bulbous, grinning beast by selecting eight actions in the correct order. It sounds simpler than it is: close observation of each move is key in order to work out how each one works and might relate to the others. It's a joy to study Arnaud Millot's art and animation – the creature receiving a nasty sunburn or vomiting up dangerous eggs, a wizard with a bubble wand summoning a meteor. The price of a failure is some scary voicework, while Robin Richard's music is ample excuse for just one more go. If you've got kids who can stomach some of the weirder moments of Adventure Time, this is a perfect choice to puzzle out together one night.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

PERIPHERAL

VX AimSwitch
bit.ly/vxaimswitch

There have been a few mouse-and-keyboard peripherals for PS4 and Xbox One kicking about, but this is the first we've seen that's also compatible with Switch. GameSir's VX AimSwitch is a fine choice for people who prefer slightly more precise controls when playing on console, boasting a stable wireless connection from up to 32.8 feet, configurable mouse buttons, RGB lighting, mechanical keys and a detachable palmrest. Of course, there's a separate conversation to be had about whether it's really fair to bust out MKB controls in something like a competitive console shooter – but if you're unconcerned with the ethics of it all, preordering this will cost you about £77.



continue

Magnificent father
Miyazaki receives Lifetime Achievement at this year's Joysticks

Good among us
New *Injustice 2* world champion SonicFox donates $10,000 to his competitor's family

Thundershock factor
The Detective Pikachu film looks bizarre – and, weirdly, brilliant

Netflix and kill
Devil May Cry will get its own animated series à la *Castlevania*

quit

Walked out
Sony will skip E3 2019 in the dumbest move it's made since *Riiiiidge Racer*

Dishonourable
Ninja goes on a reporting spree in *Fortnite*. Your Esports Personality Of The Year, everybody

Bad move
Pokemon: Let's Go's overreliance on motion controls excludes many

Horse play
One poor chap named Colm O'Driscoll catches *RDR2*-themed flak online



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DISPATCHES JANUARY



Issue 326

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation.Plus

Beyond redemption

I was waiting with bated breath for the **Edge** review of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, especially as it came out after I had already bought the game. I knew it would score well, I'm sure most of my fellow readers thought the same. But as I played it, I had a nagging voice in my head that said, 'This isn't an **Edge** 10'. And then your review came out, and it was, and I was puzzled.

I always saw the '10' as something revolutionary. Something that truly made you play in a new way. This was HD, 4k, hyper-real *Red Dead*, but it was still *Red Dead*. Another downbeat story doesn't change that. It was why I was utterly unsurprised when *Breath Of The Wild* got one. And I think both are good counterpoints to discuss games through.

One felt that fidelity was the key to make a living, breathing world, and the other merely made a world someone would want to spend time in. While I appreciate you can't throw out a rule book, after working on a game for eight years, you'd expect something revolutionary. However, I'm still setting way markers, I'm still following a prescribed path. I'm still having to do busy work disguised as gaming. I'm still following an NPC while they expound narrative at me. None of this feels like a 10.

> "As I played Red Dead, I had a nagging voice in my head that said, 'This isn't an Edge 10'"

Yet for all that, when I am with my horse, in the middle of nowhere, far away from the hullaballoo of the main game, I get it. Fishing, hunting, or merely existing in the world is a pleasure. However it took me a good ten to 15 hours to reach this state of mind. My cackhandedness getting me into trouble with the law, whether it was shooting innocent bystanders or punching my horse accidentally. Some of these resulted in ridiculous stories I told my friends, other times it just ruined a mission I'd completed and just broke the whole illusion.

I appreciate game reviews, and opinions, are like arseholes in that we all have them. However **Edge**'s is the one I trust the most. I had hoped they would be at the vanguard of protecting those who develop the games (and the weeks before its release the crunch news was across all channels) but like almost all outlets it chose to turn a blind eye because the product was close to spectacular. Maybe it is a case of no one wanting to know how the sausage is made, but I feel if we reward developers for this behaviour, we are part of the problem. I appreciate many contracts are related to Metacritic scores, and as such, lowering scores would actually harm those who need them for the bonuses they worked so hard for.

I think the above demonstrates what a quandary we are in. We want to and should celebrate games which elevate the art, and *Red Dead* definitely did that, but we need to manage our own expectations and excesses, while also thinking of the human cost to our consumption.

Anand Modha

We realise *Red Dead* isn't for everyone, but it certainly was for us. As for crunch, it simply can't factor in to a score, unless all future review code is accompanied by staff timesheets and Glassdoor reports. Anyway, did you really just say you trust **Edge**'s arsehole more than anyone else's? We suppose we'll take praise wherever we can.

Tome of healing

After reading the sad news that two of your longstanding stablemates have had to close their doors, I just wanted to drop a line to say how much I value what you guys and gals are doing at **Edge**. I've been on the mend from a sod of an illness in the past year or so, and a key part of recovery has been that oh-so faddish thing, 'self care'. I've largely



interpreted this as an excuse to buy a Switch and tool around Hyrule rediscovering a hobby that had slipped out of my life for a long time with all the stresses and strains of acting like a grown-up. It's been marvellous to just play again, but tuning back into gaming called for a trusty guide. I hadn't picked up a copy of the mag since at least 2004 – but blimey, it's even better than I remember. Funny, reflective, and a proper sense that you care about how these things are made and where they are headed. Mooching about on the sofa flicking through **Edge** for a few hours is a true joy. They will have to prize that direct debit out of my cold dead hands – here's to another 25 years.
Matt Foster

Bless you for this, Matt, and not least for the timing of its arrival so close to print deadline. It's great to know that work that's affecting our health is helping someone else's. Once this issue's gone, we are definitely getting this cough looked at.

Blue-sky printing

It saddens me to find out about the demise of GamesTM and GamesMaster. The latter I stopped reading years ago, as I had outgrown its content, as I had done with Nintendo Power, GamePro, and EGM. And so, I personally didn't feel too bad never seeing them again. But GamesTM was another matter. Come to think of it, although I have followed dozens of game mags through the years, it was the first I was still reading while it went under. Granted, I've always enjoyed **Edge** more, but GamesTM was always worth checking out as a second opinion. The retro section was particularly good. Actually, the whole thing was full of good stuff. I recall arguing with a college professor which magazine was better, and I remember applauding how GamesTM had both the content of a mature editorial, while also still oozing the enthusiasm for videogames that youngsters only have (we both agreed, though, that **Edge** had more depth to it).

Above all though, the thing I liked the most about your old competitor was the all-so-elegant 'Better than/Worse than' graph. This not only immediately gave me an idea how good a game was, and what kind of game it was, it was also able to take funny jabs at bad ones.

Which brings me to the another point: I can't help wondering if **Edge** could adopt Better than/ Worse than. Probably not, because it wouldn't fit your serious attitude. But maybe you could come up with something similarly elegant. Perhaps mention two or three games a reviewed game reminds you of. Or an 'also consider' list.

Either way, please continue to arrive at my doorstep every four weeks: there's nothing like print to fully engage with my other favourite medium.
Robert August de Meijer

That sounds a bit too much like hard work, honestly, and in any case we rather like things as they are. How's this: everything is better than *Yaiba*, but worse than *Puzzle & Dragons*.

Some justice

After seeing the Hype article in **E**325, and the subsequent review in **E**326, it seems that *Red Dead Redemption 2* is now everywhere I look. Even on holiday in Amsterdam it adorned huge banners on the side of buildings; the biggest marketing push I've seen for a game in a while. Further to this, my wife forwarded me an article about how YouTube had taken down videos of players beating an in-game suffragette to death in *RDR2*, and it provoked no little discussion.

Developers can create these incredibly immersive experiences, in which a player can do literally anything – in this case, beat a woman to death, or hogtie her to a horse and drag her along the ground. Other footage I've seen involves lassoing a man in the street and dragging him up a building, or dumping a tied-up man into a lake. I've never given any credence to the 'videogames = violence' debate, but I still wonder whether it's really necessary to give players the option to do these things without any supporting narrative context.

Film and TV is so deliberate in its violence. Each scene is handpicked and usually carries a message or narrative hook that justifies the brutality. But in videogames – especially open-world titles – this isn't always the case. Is it the developers' responsibility to provide the most immersive experience possible, no matter the cost? Or is it their responsibility to create experiences that offer meaning, provoke thought, and educate players?

And, is it a negative reflection on the developers that they conceive of and deliberately include these things in games? Or does one place all blame on the player – after all, they don't have to do those things; they simply have the option to do them.

I think a defining moment in videogames was with the hotly debated scene in *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, No Russian, which I think is ingrained in the minds of most gamers of a certain age. Here is the perfect balance of free will within a narrative context – the player is given the choice to role play as a terrorist or maintain the ideals of the character they currently control. Both options are, in my opinion, valid – the weight of the choice feels significant either way, and both choices offer a narrative heft. What the player chooses, ultimately, doesn't matter, but I think in either scenario the player will feel something.

Experiences like this have helped games gain cultural recognition, and prove they can be significant in contributing to the discourse of many difficult issues. However, when a player can kill or torture anyone in a sandbox without any context, it feels like a step backwards.
Chris Walker

The reason *Red Dead*'s 'annoying feminist' videos were so shocking is that they draw their narrative context from the real world, rather than the one the game portrays. Rockstar sought to make a point about the politics of the game's time period, which was then used to make a statement about today's instead. Can we really blame Rockstar for giving awful people the chance to be awful? We're not sure. Either way, enjoy your new PS Plus sub. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

The joy of videogames is that they let us live out cathartic fantasies, whether that be swinging through Manhattan as Spider-Man, defeating hordes of monsters as a bald space marine, or pushing levers as a ponytailed burglar of ancient treasures. But what if your fantasy is to beat up and kill feminists? Not to worry: that too is now possible, thanks to *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

Rockstar's cowboy epic is not, of course, primarily designed as a feminist-abusing simulator, but it can certainly be played that way, as a YouTuber known as Shirrako has monomanically demonstrated on YouTube. One video, entitled Annoying Feminist Fed To Alligator, does just what it says on the tin. In another, Shirrako stands in front of a suffragette on the street while she says: "Women and men both deserve to decide the future. This is meant to be the land of liberty, but somehow I am not free to vote? Who says that?" (That last line is highly anachronistic, of course, being a quite modern expression of incredulity.) He then punches her in the face, lassos her and ties her up, takes her on his horse to a handily lit cave, and then throws her off a high ledge.

Naturally these videos have become rather controversial. But some people yawn. What's new? After all, in earlier Rockstar games you could, notoriously, murder a sex worker to get your money back. But no one is forcing you to do these bad things! It's just that the game is such a broad and deep simulator that you can play it however you like. If you choose to be evil, that's on you. Indeed, in *RDR2* you can also murder members of the Ku Klux Klan, and no one has complained about that. Why all the whining?

It's natural to present some version of this argument in reaction to moral controversies over games, but I don't think it was good enough back in the *GTA* days, and it's not good enough now. Because Rockstar has never made a simulator where just anything can happen. In *RDR2*, you can brew



Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

It's never just a game, like a novel is never just a few hundred pieces of paper sewn together

a can of coffee over your campfire, but you can't actually say whatever you like to the suffragette and have a real political conversation. Nor, for that matter, can you sexually assault her. Imagine if Rockstar included a 'rape' button in its games. Would anyone care to defend them by saying you don't have to use it? In fact, designers are always making moral and political decisions about what to simulate and what not to.

The truth of the matter, then, is that Rockstar has deliberately chosen to allow such actions in the game, and can't just blame the perversity of its players. People like Shirrako are showing something that is in the game by design, and if we want to defend the creators we need a different argument. You might, for example, want to plead that making suffragettes uniquely invulnerable to violence would compromise the realistic immersion of the experience, but I'm not sure that's a terribly good line either. So many other things already compromise the realistic immersion of the experience – for instance, the fact that your cowboy is so superhumanly strong that he is able to drag a trussed-up suffragette on the end of a lasso behind his horse with only one hand, or that said trussed-up suffragette doesn't scream herself hoarse on the way to her execution – that one more would hardly tip the balance.

The other thing that has changed since the old *GTA* hookers controversy, of course, is that, thanks to streaming and YouTube, videogames are now weapons in the wider culture wars. When Shirrako unveiled his first suffragette-killing videos, a horde of incels and other pathetic specimens of masculinity posted approving comments saying they wished they could kill feminists in real life in such picturesque ways. When this was widely reported by appalled liberals, Shirrako felt spurred to keep trolling, and made a new video in which he shot a suffragette and fed her to pigs. "Seeing SJWs on twitter motivated me to continue the series," he wrote. "The more tears they shed, the more creative we'll get. Accept that it's JUST a game or run out of tears."

But of course it's not just a game. It's never just a game, like a novel is never just a few hundred pieces of paper sewn together. Videogames have a problem with violence, and as long as the rest of us prefer to turn a blind eye to it, people like Shirrako are unintentionally performing a public service by gleefully pointing out the extent of that problem.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

For the first time this week I ran down my Switch battery without leaving the house. Until now my Switch has only ever been used at home while connected to the TV, barring the occasional rainy afternoon Labo session with my eldest. It is in the dock, or in my bag. And then *Diablo III* came along. It's a game I've only ever dabbled in, in spite of – or perhaps because of – the fact that its core loop, of hitting things to get new toys that make you hit things harder, is essentially my catnip. I tried it on PC, and bounced off it. I played it on PS4, and enjoyed the ten or so hours I spent with it, but drifted off after getting distracted by something else. Probably *Destiny*. It's normally *Destiny*.

Switch feels perfect for it, however, and this surprises me. I've struggled with many of the console's ports of ageing thirdparty games, which unlike most of the Switch library feel like games made solely for handheld mode, since I already own better-looking versions on other platforms. The UI is almost unreadable on the dinky screen, and the Joy-Cons, which already feel too small in my hands, seem even less fit for purpose than usual, my index fingers forever mixing up the shoulder and trigger buttons, my thumbs pining for larger sticks with a little more travel.

Diablo contradicts all that – which is appropriate, really, because *Diablo* is a game of contradictions. It's a game that, to the layperson looking on, should be really difficult, as hordes of enormous enemies with huge health bars surge at you constantly. But it's a doddle, because the power curve is so ludicrously tilted in your favour (early in the game, at least: I've no doubt it goes the other way in the endgame, and can't wait to find out). It appears, on the surface, to be a very serious game, a tale of something-or-other overrunning… okay, I haven't been paying attention. Yet it resolutely refuses to take itself seriously, understanding that a game which finds new ways of telling you, 'Okay, now your legs set on fire when you press ZR' has no business being all grimdark, whatever the aesthetic suggests. I have a pair of legendary boots whose flavour text reads 'You gots to watch those feets', for heaven's (okay, hell's) sake.



Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

Diablo is a tremendously chaotic game, yet it's also the most relaxing thing I've played in an age

Above all, it's a tremendously chaotic game – a constant melee of good and bad guys engulfed in fancy alpha effects with loot and gold spilling out all over the shop – yet it's also the most relaxing thing I've played in an age. And this is why, for two nights running, I've drained the Switch battery to empty, tooling around in Nephalem Rifts on the sofa while half-watching whatever's on telly in the background. It's active enough for me to feel like I'm actually playing it, but quiet enough that it doesn't bother my wife (I adore that you can hold the primary attack button down, rather than having to mash it). And it's braindead enough that I can still pay attention to whatever's on the TV. And they say men can't multitask! It turns out we just need the right kind of lightning damage on our boots, and ideally something synergistic on a belt or chestpiece. Obvious in hindsight.

The Switch sofa battery drainage may be new, but *Diablo* is, as I always knew it would be, the kind of game I am drawn to. When you play videogames for a living, your attitude to playing games in your spare time changes somewhat. When you're being paid to play, just as if you've paid for a new game you're not sure about yet, you push on through it out of a sense of duty. When I'm off the clock that simply doesn't apply, and I'm struck by how drawn I am to games like these: things that are complex and difficult, yet oddly soothing. If I hadn't been playing *Diablo* the last few nights I'd have been playing *Puzzle & Dragons*, one of the most fiendishly difficult games I've ever played but which now, after five years and thousands of hours, is like putty in my hands. There's *Destiny* too, of course, a game originally (and successfully) built on the mantra "shooting aliens is fucking relaxing".

I wonder whether other games are similarly built with this philosophy in mind: understanding that there are meditative qualities to be found in things that appear to offer nothing of the sort. It's something I intend to mull over further in the days and weeks to come, as I wear out battery after battery, sort-of-playing a game and sort-of-watching First Dates. Perhaps I'll plan out a column or two while we're at it. Let's find out just how far we can push this whole multitasking thing.

Nathan Brown is ***Edge****'s editor, and has spent the last two weeks unsuccessfully trying to get Broken Crown to drop*


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ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

Do you remember Bam Entertainment? It was a short-lived publisher of shovelware that raised a bunch of money by pitching that it could get cheap movie licences and turn them into even cheaper games, then burnt all the cash and went out of business almost immediately. (Not to be confused with Brash Entertainment, which had the same pitch and did the same exact thing.) Anyway, in 2002 I had pitched a PS2 launch game to them called *Ice 9* for an impossibly small amount of money that was originally based on the Colin Farrell star vehicle The Recruit. It died quickly and painfully, but before that we crunched hard. Like, 'sleep at your desk' hard. 'Break up with your partner and then drive to the airport at eight in the morning after not sleeping for two days to present the game to Sony' hard.

We had already been denied approval, so this was our last chance, and right before I was about to present, an otherwise pleasant Sony rep leaned in and whispered, "Just so you know, Sony has decided to never approve anything from Bam ever again. But good luck." Needless to say they remained unconvinced. So what was the point of all those extra hours? It was a destructive and pointless crunch that neither saved the project nor enriched our lives, and in retrospect it's an easy one to dismiss. But I've crunched on every game I've made, to some extent, and I honestly don't expect that to ever change.

However, I think there's a big difference between positive overtime and negative crunch. I've never been bothered putting in the extra hours to make something better, but I've often resented being pushed to turn up just to make a game work at all. There is an obvious need for better management, more realistic planning, and a lifetime ban on the expectation that developers will make up for failures of management with long hours for no compensation. But game development is full of unexpected moments, and I'm not sure a lot of them are avoidable – or even if I would want them to be.

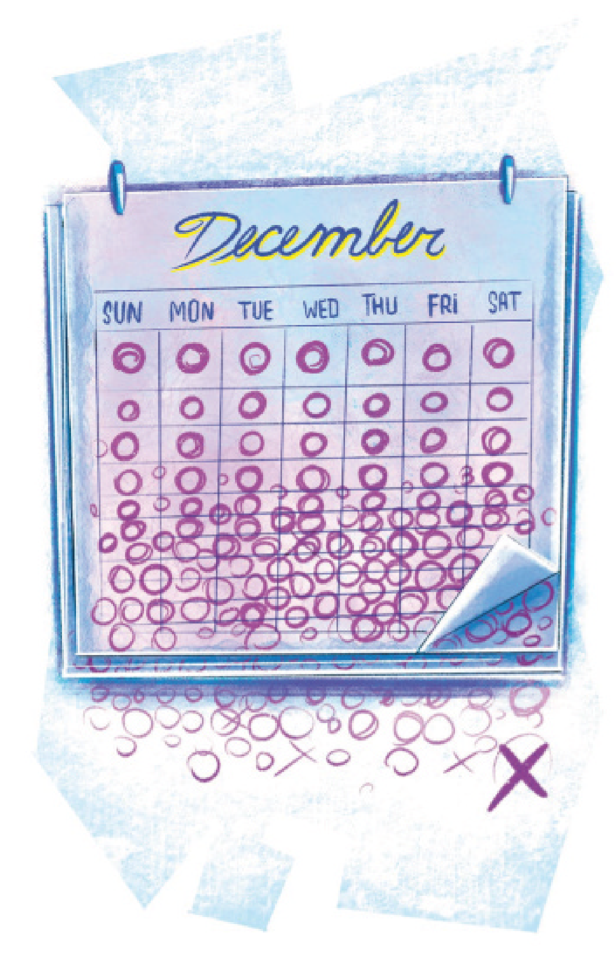


Illustration kaeru.com.ar

> We compress our development phases in a deeply unhealthy way that doesn't exist in other media

Games combine art and technology in ways that are still massively challenging, meaning development is a stream of new problems and massive opportunities, both of which put huge pressure on the best laid plans. But there are ways we can improve.

For one, we compress our development phases in a deeply unhealthy way that doesn't exist in other media. We are often in production before we have truly achieved our pre-production goals, and I'm almost always on tour promoting the game while still editing the content, and we're making trailers from half-finished games. Maybe it's a throwback to the bedroom-coding roots of gamedev when there was no need for process or structure, but we can at least plan ramp-ups better and wait until the game is finished before promoting it. Gone are the days when you would sell games based on a graphical feature that could potentially be quickly copied. We can wait. It's better for devs and better for players.

We should also improve how we carry staff across projects and teams. One of the strengths of Ubi Montreal is that they can roll large chunks of the 'content' teams across projects, meaning they can avoid having too many people during pre-production and can ramp down fast without having to let people go. To get the same result, a small team like ours may need to strike a balance between fulltime staff and contractors or outsourcing: if you do it well, you can add time at each production phase without absolutely destroying your budget or your team.

That said, sometimes it's in the culture of the place. Some studios are renowned crunch factories, others have had permanent, mandatory overtime nights in trade for permanent free weekends, and some have refused to crunch at all – and I've seen all flavours succeed and fail. The challenge comes when individuals are at odds with the studio culture: I've had to kick people out of the office because they just wanted to keep working when we thought it was unhealthy, and similarly we've had people refuse to do a single minute of overtime even when we desperately needed just a bit more for the good of the project.

On the edge of the big push toward a December announcement, we're trying to find the right balance for Typhoon, and the hardest question to answer is this: how much extra push would be too much, if the other option is wasting a few years of our lives?

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick


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H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Escape artists

Sometimes you just need to get away from it all – to put life on pause for a few hours, and happily get lost in a fantasy world. Indeed, videogames are such a powerful form of escapism that there are those who would (and frequently, irritatingly do) argue that's *all* they're good for. This is not true, of course, but neither is the idea of videogames solely as didacticism or social commentary. As always, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

Set in the series' alternate universe of Strangereal, combat flight sim *Ace Combat 7: Skies Unknown* (p38) is less about pure fidelity than you might expect. The aircraft might be real-life replicas, Unreal Engine 4 visuals polished to a high shine, but for series brand director Kazutoki Kono, *Ace Combat* has always been about creating the *illusion* of reality to capture would-be fighter pilots' imaginations.

Battle-royale shooter *Stormdivers* (p42), meanwhile, is Housemarque's attempt to face financial facts. It's brutal out there, and people resonate with that, as 2018's most popular genre proves. But there is evidence of the old ways that undercuts this: particle effects, teleport-dashes and the familiar Housemarque rhythm of dodging into and out of danger, of exerting a miraculous kind of control over the situation.

And then there's *Small Talk* (p46), a tale of a party at the end of the world. In this setting – at once surreal and familiar, filled with people with televisions for heads and very relatable problems – allegory is a tool for introspection that often transcends the game itself. It's startlingly fresh, an examination of *why* we enter these worlds and what we're running away from, hidden behind pastel-coloured layers. Some of the most astute games mix logic and magic, and can be an escape or a mirror, depending on what you need. Nowadays, we feel as though we need both.

MOST WANTED

Afterparty PC
The line at the Day Of The Devs booth was so long that we couldn't get anywhere near Night School Studio's underworld drinking simulator (it being situated next to the bar likely didn't help). No matter – we're off to bribe the developers with a round of slammers in exchange for a playable build.

Kingdom Hearts III PC, PS4, Xbox One
This is a JRPG time of year, the Christmas break being one of the few weeks on the calendar where we can play games for the sheer fun of it. That this won't quite be with us in time is a shame, but Tetsuya Nomura's been making it for over a decade. Another month won't hurt.

Yakuza 4 PS4
It's been at least five minutes since we last wrote about Kazuma Kiryu, whose fourth outing arrives on PS4 in January. With four playable characters, each with their own fighting style, we're keen to see how it stands up in a post-*Yakuza 0* world.



Front Mission never really took off overseas, but *Left Alive* director Toshifumi Nabeshima points to the likes of Pacific Rim, *Titanfall* and Transformers as evidence of rising western interest in big stompy robots



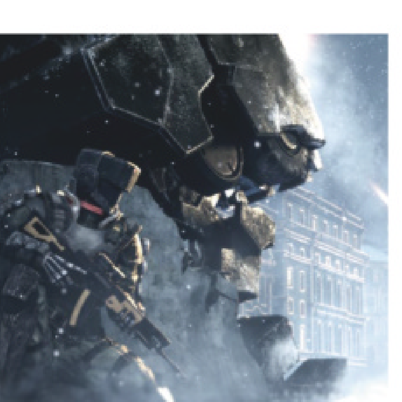
HYPE

LEFT ALIVE

Rumours of Front Mission's demise have been greatly exaggerated

Developer/publisher Square Enix
Format PC, PS4
Origin Japan
Release March 5





The *Front Mission* series is 11 games old, and in the 23-plus years since its inception it has sold millions across Japan. Yet in the west, it remains an unknown quantity; only two games in the series have ever been localised on these shores. That's a big part of the reason for its latest instalment bearing no mention of the series. But *Left Alive* is also a very different kind of game.

Front Mission is a matter of tactics and strategy, of armies of giant robots facing off against each other. *Left Alive*, however, is a thirdperson shooter in which the Wanzers, as *Front Mission* styles them (short for the German word 'wanderpanzer', or 'walking tank'), belong to the enemy, and the enemy alone. The game is set in the early days of a war, the protagonist one of few survivors in a suddenly war-torn city. Thus the stage is set not only for a thirdperson shooter, but one in which the sort of mech-on-mech combat on which this series made its name arrives only rarely, and in which avoiding conflict is often better than engaging in it.

> ***"We wanted to tell a good war story that also happens to have robots in it"***

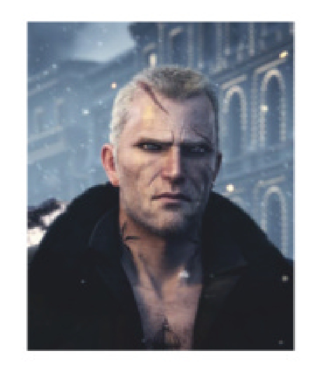
"Of course, we do have scenes in the game where you ride these giant robots and fight with them," game director **Toshifumi Nabeshima** tells us. "But we wanted to move away from that a little, and tell a good war story that also happens to have robots in it." It's a story about people first and foremost, that recasts Wanzers from their previous starring role to that of a pacing device. You'll take them into combat occasionally, hijacking the biggest threat in the game and turning it on your aggressors, though doing so naturally alerts the enemy to your position. But the bulk of the game is played on foot: while you're notionally given the choice between going loud or staying in the shadows, a persistent scarcity of weapons and ammo will make you think twice before simply steaming in. "You've really got to think about things like traps and ambushes," Nabeshima says, "finding ways to lure the enemy into situations where you can deal with them without sacrificing too much."

Choice is a theme outside combat, too. Nabeshima gives the example of you happening upon the imminent execution of a group of citizens, and being able to decide whether to save them, knowing a battle will result, or simply skulking on by. "And while you can save them, it doesn't necessarily follow that they're good people," he says. "They may not be grateful, may say it's all your fault that this war is happening. The nature of these situations, and how difficult they are, changes as the game goes on."

The choices you make during the game will impact which of the multiple endings you see. Nabeshima believes this is true both to the series' history, and that of its publisher. "*Front Mission* is known as a game about robots fighting, but if you really look at the older games, the world, the setting and the characters are created to a really fine degree. It's a game about stories, and how people interact. That's one of the things that makes it a Square Enix game, I think."

Nabeshima is a relatively new hire. He's been making games for 20 years, and spent the vast majority of that at FromSoftware, working mostly on the *Armored Core* games. A friend told him that *Front Mission* veteran Shinji Hashimoto was plotting the series' return. Since joining he admits to being struck, and somewhat intimidated, by what happens when a series enjoys as long a life as *Front Mission*'s. "There's a huge amount of lore documentation. All the characters and factions are so detailed, you really have to get very deeply into it. I didn't want to make something that would run counter to that spirit when I started working here. I felt like I really had to step up my game."

This is a new direction for the series, one Nabeshima and team have had to build from the ground up. And that lack of familiarity certainly showed in a TGS demo that was, to put it mildly, rather rough around the edges (and voice acting that's as camp as Christmas). Yet it remains a premise full of potential, and there's no disputing the talent Square Enix has assembled to make it happen, whether its mission is accomplished or not. ■



Robotic delivery

Nabeshima may have spent his time at FromSoftware working on *Armored Core* rather than *Dark Souls*, but it's clear that the studio's way of making games has informed *Left Alive*. "FromSoft is really about people wanting to make something that they themselves find exciting," he says. "Hidetaka Miyazaki once said to me that From is not the kind of company that can make something like *Super Mario*, that everyone can enjoy. Instead they try to make things that a specific group of people can enjoy a lot. I've carried some of that over to *Left Alive*. There are things in there that don't have a mass appeal: it's a dark story, and there are elements, like robots, that not a huge number of people like. I'd really like to make a game that appeals to people who do find that kind of thing interesting, and really do it for them."









TOP **Rather than the stars of the show, Wanzers are now more like the Nemesis in *Resident Evil 3*: a fatal threat that must be avoided.** ABOVE **You'll spend much of the game in the shadows, faced with the decision of tackling a problem head on, or avoiding it entirely.** MAIN **While the game's visuals are unremarkable, things are elevated by the hand of renowned character designer Yoji Shinkawa, best known for *Metal Gear Solid***

TOP **Nabeshima insists that, despite the very different structure, this is tonally true to *Front Mission*: "It has a solid core, the same mentality and mindset that was behind the old games."** RIGHT **It won't always be like this. The TGS demo showed a mech-on-mech combat set-piece that played out like a match of *Virtual On***





ACE COMBAT 7: SKIES UNKNOWN

The classic flight-sim action series propels itself into the future

Developer	Bandai Namco Studios, Project Aces
Publisher	Bandai Namco Entertainment
Format	PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	Japan
Release	January 18



Set in the *Ace Combat* fictional universe of Strangereal, *Skies Unknown*'s story follows the tale of an Erusean princess caught up in a war between two nations. You play Osean Air Defense Force pilot Trigger ▶



TOP **Being directed along a runway while sitting in a VR cockpit is an oddly exciting part of the experience of playing fighter pilot.**
ABOVE **The VR campaign may be short, but it's custom-made for VR. We can expect plenty of close-quarter runway drama, then.**
LEFT **Aiming missiles with your head in VR helps negate any nausea caused by flipping around in the air.**
BOTTOM **Kono: "The VR mode was created to present one of the future possibilities of *Ace Combat*. It raises up the most primitive experience of the game: 'Flight and fight freely in the sky'"**



ACE COMBAT 7: SKIES UNKNOWN

We get the feeling Project Aces is trying to impress us. As we sit in the cockpit of our F/A-18F Super Hornet and trundle towards the runway, all hell breaks loose. Fighter jets careen towards the ground like meteors while a friendly tank fires wildly into the sky; next, a plane hurtles across our path, missing our nose cone by a hair before exploding into a fireball. This is typical virtual reality showboating – dramatic stuff, but gimmicky.

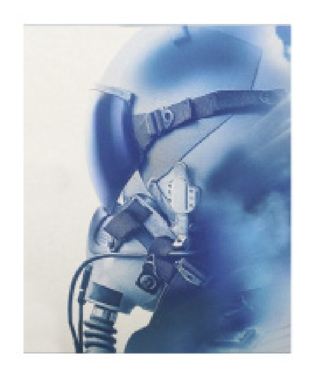
But as soon as we pull up into the skies to defend the airbase, we forget about the ground-based theatrics entirely. Here is where *Ace Combat 7: Skies Unknown*'s VR mode *really* comes into its own, as we dip and loop after enemy pilots, even flying upside-down comfortably for long stretches as the fictional world of Strangereal falls away above us. "There's a lot of knowledge of techniques crammed into this," series producer **Kazutoki Kono** says. "Things like the flame around the cockpit, the speed settings caused by other effects not influenced by players' handling, or warning sounds that announce the speed change to players in advance. This helps them psychologically prepare for the next movement." It's staggering how nausea-free it is to repeatedly barrel roll away from incoming missiles, or dive down into the clouds before popping up to flank a target: Kono's team have plenty of previous experience designing for VR, and it shows. "We weren't in the grip of the fixed idea that jet fighters are not suitable for VR content, which many people were worried about when this was announced," he says. "We tried without stereotype, and we found many things in *Ace Combat*'s gameplay were really suitable, and the causes of nausea are few."

It's the attention to detail that really enchants. Veering into cloud cover to cloak ourselves from enemy fire is particularly pleasing: water droplets stream over the glass of our cockpit, and even the accompanying score is plunged into submarine sound. The effect is something Kono calls "functional beauty", the result of a slightly exaggerated version of reality that acts as a UI indicator of where exactly the player is in the sky without cluttering up the screen. "In every moment, all the elements need to influence each other without any waste, combine together delicately and match together in the highest quality, so that the impression that players feel will be increased many times more."

Whether it's this keenly engineered synergy that contributes to our improved performance in VR, or whether the challenge has been dialled down in this mode, it's hard to say. But we dearly miss the sensation of piloting a real jet when playing *Ace Combat 7* on a regular screen, and even find it more difficult to navigate. Still, the overcast Yinshi Valley is a delight to slalom a nippy F-14D Super Tomcat through: the mountainous canyon is filled with towering pillars of rock that both offer cover and threaten to spike us out of the air should we lose focus. We pepper enemy radar facilities and anti-aircraft guns with long-range missiles, hoping for the safe rescue of our squadron.

On this evidence, the VR mode is Ace Combat 7's crowning achievement

Series stalwarts will doubtless prefer the classic approach, but on this evidence, the (sadly rather limited, we're told) VR mode is *Ace Combat 7*'s crowning achievement, and an attractive entry point to a venerable, and perhaps intimidating, series of games for new players. It's also an ideal fit for what the series has always been about: the feeling of being an actual fighter pilot. "'Imitation' is one of the philosophical elements at play, and *Ace Combat* is 'pretend play'," Kono says. "I'm pleased if the depiction is as close to reality as possible. On the other hand, it also needs the elements that help people enjoy the world. These two factors are opposed to each other – but 'pretend play' integrates both. The key is to give players the impression that their experience in the game actually happened, and when people tell other people about how wonderful the game is, they talk about the reality they actually experienced in their mind." ■



Rocket fuel

After 23 years of *Ace Combat*, you'd think *Ace Combat 7* would be simply going through the motions for Kazutoki Kono and the Project Aces team. Not so: it's been a tumultuous journey. One difficult moment involved scrapping a completed preview build based on previous numbered titles in the series. "We decided to give up keeping that period's *Ace Combat*, and recreate the basis from scratch," Kono says. "Honestly speaking, I considered cancelling the creation of the title." But fan support convinced him to move forward with a new numbered series entry. The VR mode has also helped keep Kono and team motivated to keep going. "There's one thing I learned from development," Kono says, "'The creators will be bored earlier than fans'. Or perhaps, 'We get anxious earlier than fans'. I've observed many a long-running title, and it's really a turning point whether creators can be patient with those anxieties and endure those pressures."



HYPE

STORMDIVERS

Arcade lives on in Housemarque's familiar-feeling battle royale

Developer/publisher Housemarque
Format PC
Origin Finland
Release 2019

Arcade or no arcade, there is still the occasional glimmer of the old Housemarque in *Stormdivers*. Yes, it's a thirdperson battle-royale shooter in the same mould as *Playerunknown's Battlegrounds*, as we drop into the map and methodically work our way through buildings looking for weapons and supplies. But soon, we begin to notice the telltale signs of the well-respected Finnish studio: Alpha's brilliant short-range teleport, for instance. The ability is at once offensive and defensive, catapulting Alpha about 20 feet across the map. One moment, we're using it to evade fire: the next, we whip past another player in a helix of particle effects and pump a shot into the back of their head.

"That teleport is sort of the closest thing we have as a basic moveset for a Housemarque game," lead gameplay designer **Tommi Hartikainen** says. "It's sort of teleport-slash-dash move which we have in pretty much all our games." We set a marker and release a key to fling ourselves out of danger and into a better attacking position – and the swirl of dazzling sparkle that accompanies it is pure *Resogun*, a welcome flash of technomancy in a drab environment. "This is a feel we've been perfecting for a long time, specifically with arcade games," says head of publishing **Mikael Haveri**. "We always took pride in making sure that we have the gameplay side of it nailed, and then the visual things are the reward, if you will. We're entering a larger environment where people are already doing similar things, so we need to stay true to all of the Housemarque legacy standards."

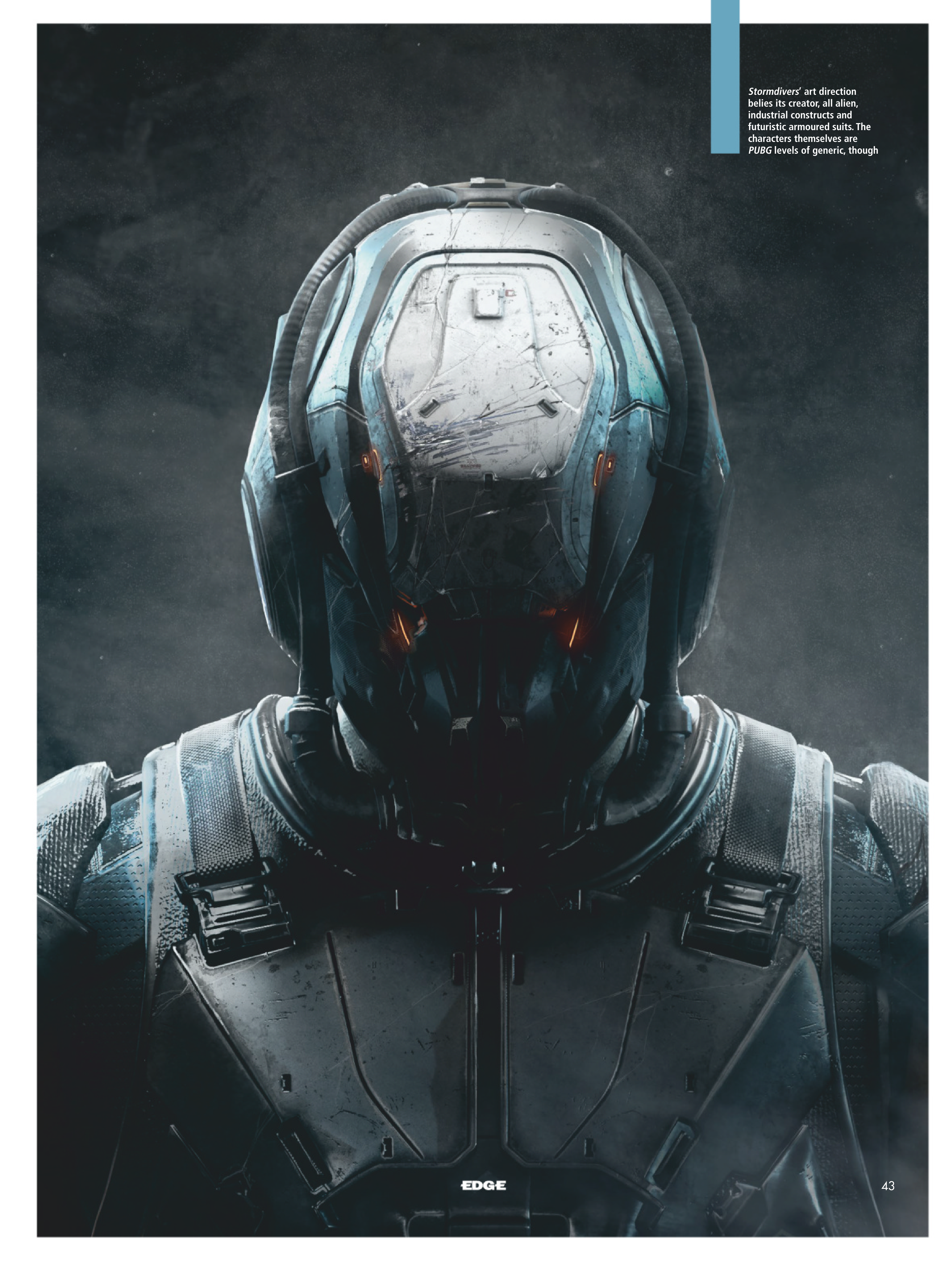
There's significant pressure to do so. The concept of *Stormdivers* dates back to almost three years ago – it was to be "a multiplayer game with a lot of chaotic elements thrown into it," Haveri says. "So you couldn't sit still, you'd always have to be moving, and through that chaos you'd have to control your melee and shooting and survive." This was long before battle royale blew up: *Stormdivers*' announcement this year after Housemarque's proclamation of 'Arcade is dead' drew plenty of ire from fans online believing the studio had now simply jumped on a bandwagon. "It stings," Haveri says, "but then again it does give you a little motivation to say, 'We're sure about this, let us show how it actually works'. And then let's see *those* comments, you know."

There's potential here. Our demo has us choose between three characters, each with their own 'movement' and 'support' ability on cooldown. We tend to gravitate towards Alpha the most, with his teleport-dash and a shield that he can take cover behind. Bravo's jetpack makes him mobile, able to gain a height advantage at a moment's notice, while his ability to drop a health-regenerating pool can save a firefight. Stealth-based Charlie is the trickiest to use at first, but will be deadly in ▶





From top: head of publishing Mikael Haveri; lead gameplay designer Tommi Hartikainen



Stormdivers' art direction belies its creator, all alien, industrial constructs and futuristic armoured suits. The characters themselves are *PUBG* levels of generic, though



the right hands – her partial invisibility makes her faster and quieter. And her sound-blocking aura is one of *Stormdivers'* most unique ideas: cast it, and it'll muffle any gun noise made in its generous radius. Naturally, the abilities are all designed to work solo, but these three together in a squad could be devastating.

For now, we're gliding from huge cliffs, dashing across terrifyingly open plains and skulking through forest hideouts alone. There's an edge of mania to proceedings, especially when we catch sight of what we assume is the traditional 'ring of death' headed our way. In fact, the encroaching threat is more dynamic than we're used to, host to all manner of storms. "Players usually avoid the tornado," Hartikainen says. "But it does have some other additional features – a tornado is always moving towards a player, so if you track the tornado, you can actually find hostile enemies." Lightning storms offer a similar advantage: if we get to higher ground and scan the horizon

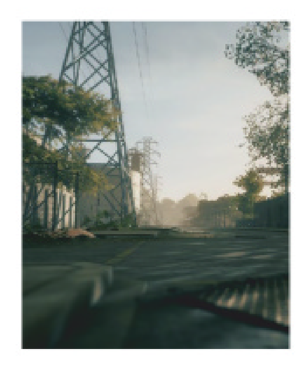
Stormdivers is at its best when played like a Housemarque game, not a battle royale

when one rolls in, the thunderbolts hit areas where remaining players might be hiding. Wind surges help close distance quickly, as we use our glider to catch the air currents and then dive back down; an unexpected eclipse proves the end for us, however, as the area is plunged into a crimson darkness and a cloaked assassin catches us unawares.

It's startling how much of an effect these PvE events have on raising the pulse and pace of the match. "Every time you come to the island you should feel something familiar: the controls, the locations and so on," Haveri says. "But everything outside the player should be changing." It's part of Housemarque's effort to keep creating 'hardcore' games that reward skill and punish mistakes harshly. To that end, *Stormdivers'* regenerative health system (you collect Storm Anomalies to increase the rate of yours over a match) feels a little out of place. Some may argue that the tension of battle royale is bound up in careful preparation, and choosing to make your move only when you feel confident. In this respect, *Stormdivers* is far more arcadey than it is anything else. "If you decide to engage on a hostile, you need to make the commitment to it," Hartikainen says. "If they start running away, you need to follow them to finish the fight – you can't just snipe from afar, because they'll go behind a corner and re-heal, right? Same thing if you're being shot at in a wide open space: you should be able to respond in a way that will not make you damaged goods for the rest of the match."

Haveri chimes in: "If you look at *Fortnite* or *PUBG*, you usually avoid engaging unless you know you have a clear advantage. Here we're trying to lower that, so you want to engage more. And that same design dynamic is in picking items up, getting them equipped and in your inventory." *Stormdivers* is at its best when played like a Housemarque game, rather than a battle royale: a zen kind of hokey cokey where you dash in and out, closing and creating space until your opponent missteps and becomes vulnerable. "This is where we're playing on the Housemarque strengths," he continues. "From our previous titles, you get tension from being on the edge – dodging bullets, rather than taking a step back. So we're trying to perfect that, in a way that allows for the action."

Still, there's a way to go for *Stormdivers* yet: the shooting can feel completely toothless at times, with very little in the way of satisfying feedback. But the dev team are intently focused on what they have now, and are hoping to branch out into "more characters, places, environments, and even other modes" post-launch, Haveri says. For now, however, they'll just have to trust that their fans will see enough arcade in the battle royale, and that others will see enough battle royale among the arcade. There may be some valuable new ground to cover between the two – if people remain curious enough about the genre. "From one perspective, you could say that, yes, *Fortnite* has won and that's the end of that," Haveri says. "But if you look at historically what multiplayer brought to the whole of gaming, it was just the beginning of a way of starting to interpret the genre. I think that battle royale is sort of a rebirth of that – and maybe we're starting to see a downward spiral here, but I think that that's exactly where there's space for reinvention." ■



Number one with a bullet

Stormdivers' mines are another example of Housemarque's previous pedigree peeping through. Get too close to the sentry-like structures and they'll begin tracking you, exploding on contact if you're too slow to escape. "Currently they only have self detonation, but we could put turrets on them and they could be shooting at you," Haveri says. "Imagine a swarm of those moving, clearly following somebody. You shoot one of them and you see this cascading chain explosion, and maybe you get somebody. If you don't, then you know that there's still someone alive in that direction." We almost wish this was already part of the demo, but restraint is key for the studio. "We haven't even tested any kind of *real* Housemarque things, like bullet hell. Those are the things that hopefully we can communicate that we're looking forward to making. We don't want to push too many of those things into the first version, but in the months after launch, we will definitely have more."

LEFT **Players enter the area in individual pods: trajectories can be controlled in mid-air for the perfect landing.**
BELOW **Vehicles are already a part of the game, hoverbikes allowing players to cover open ground more quickly**

ABOVE **Many of the lootable buildings aren't particularly identifiable. Housemarqe will need to add more landmarks to improve team communication in Squads.**
RIGHT **You'll have to get moving immediately to grab an advantage: collecting enough Storm Anomalies is crucial to buffing stats such as health regen and speed**





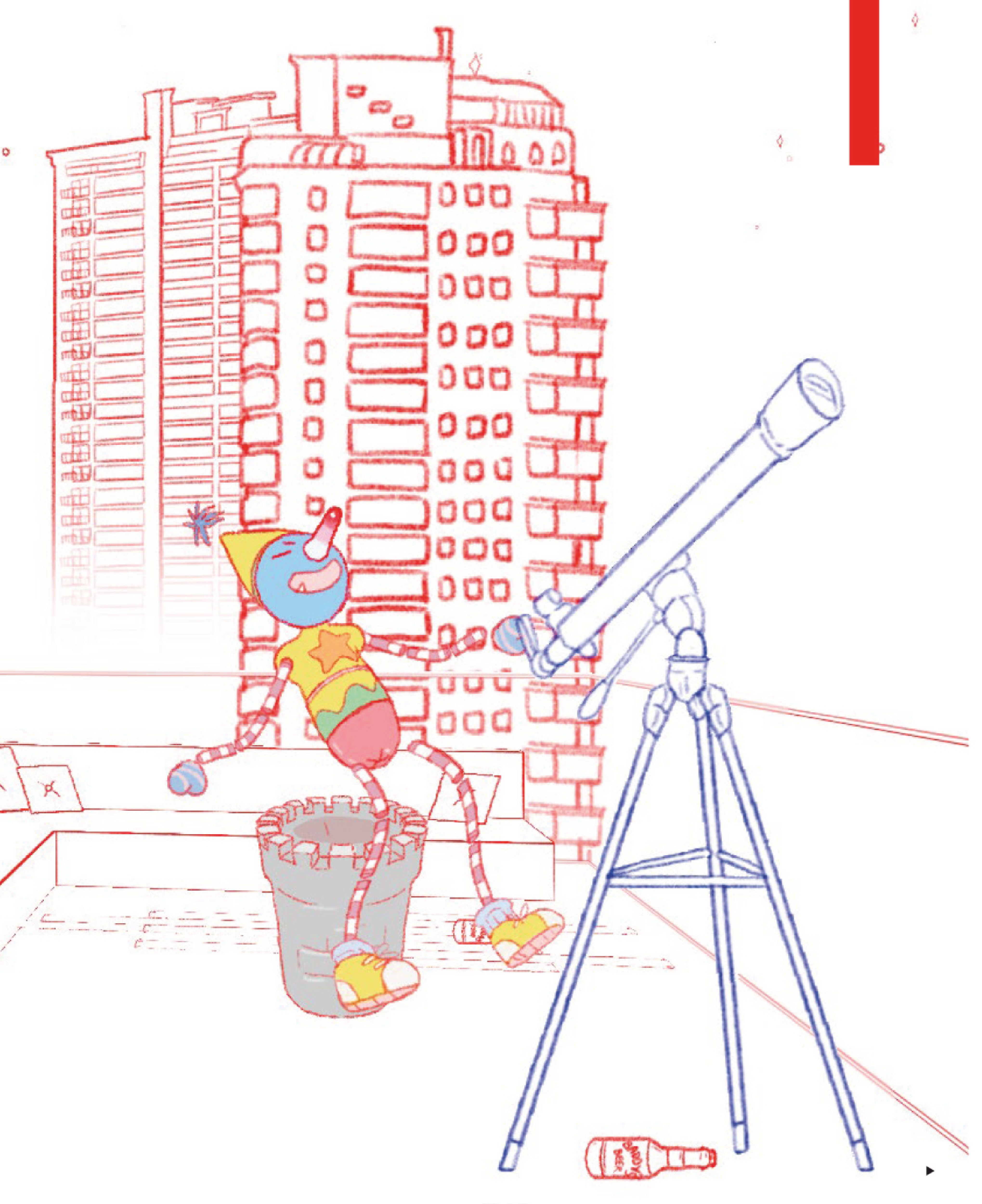
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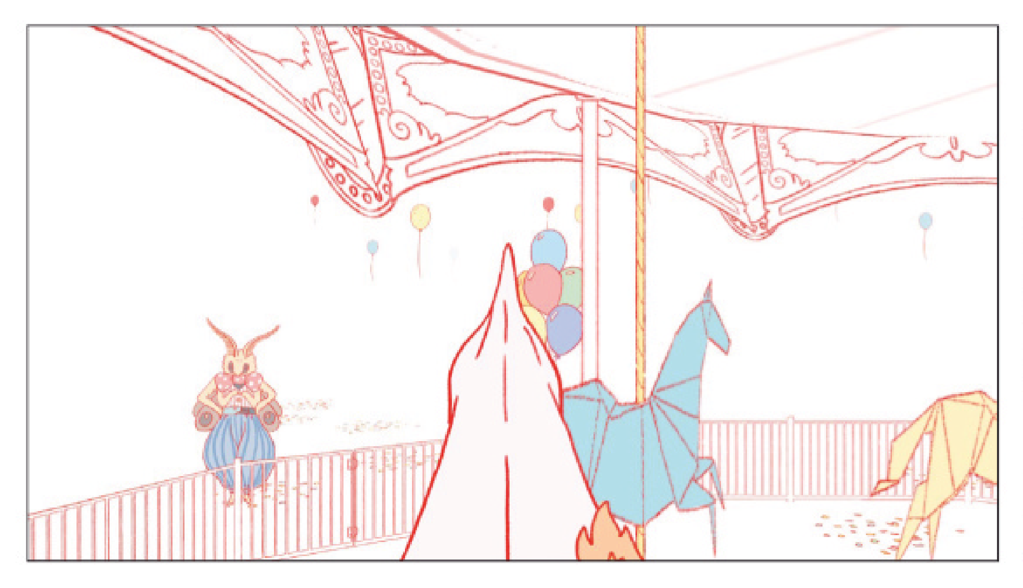
SMALL TALK

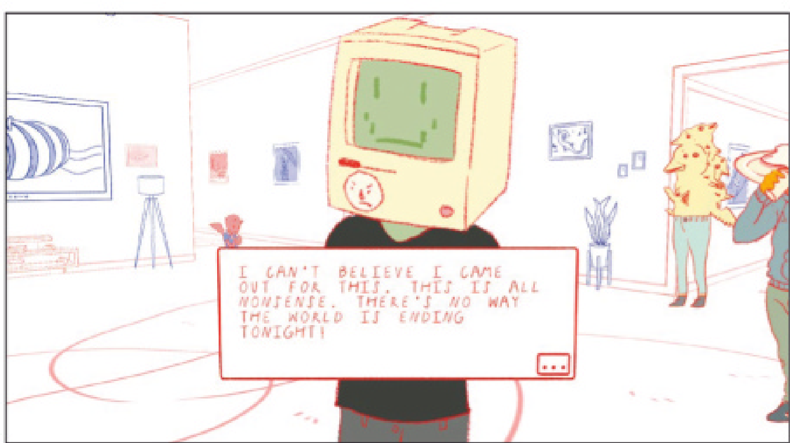
It's your party and you'll cry if you want to

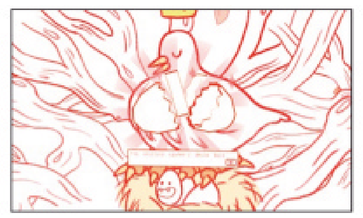
Developer/publisher	Pale Room
Format	PC
Origin	USA
Release	2019

This chap is quite terrifying – we're pretty sure he's hiding a set of teeth in his midriff. He does have some nice things to say about the inherent value of life on Earth, however, and his jokes are quite good

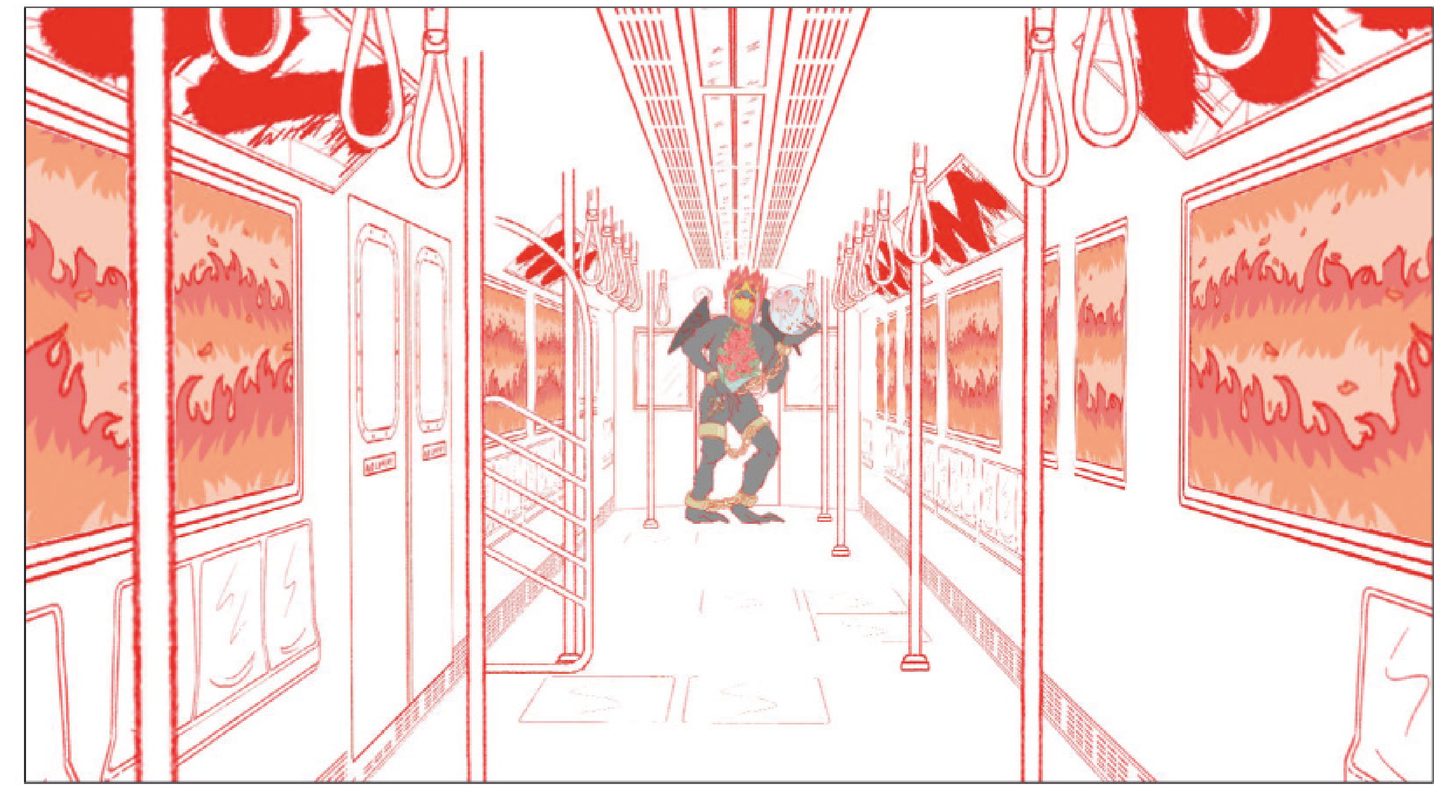


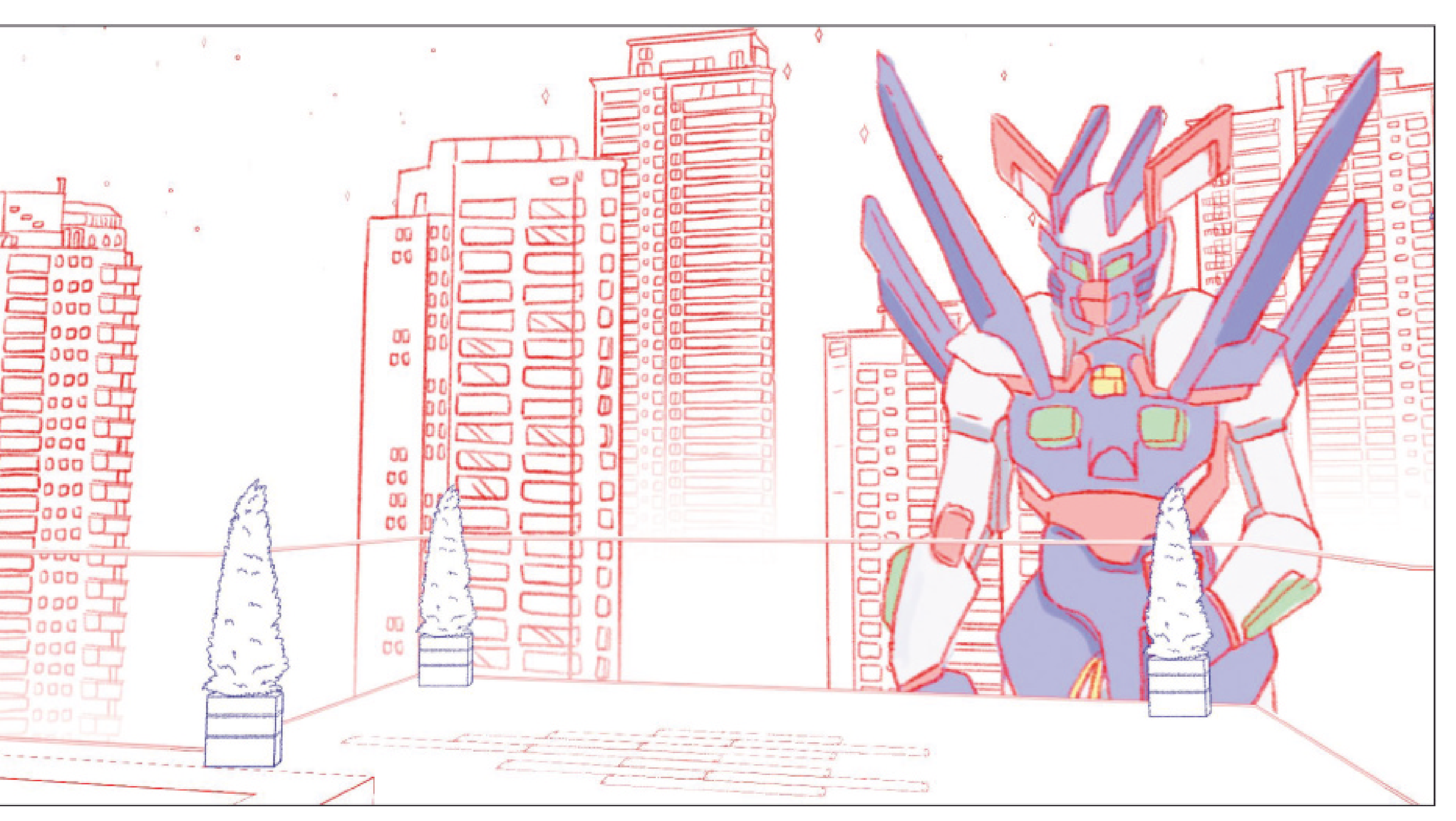






TOP **A memorable sequence on maintaining a sense of playfulness in the face of hardship involves riding a carousel run by a kindly moth. One of our chosen horses reminds us to "Watch the burnt bits, please"**

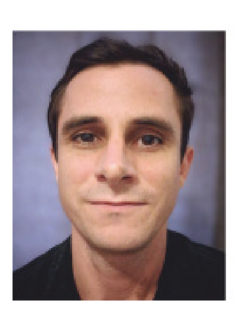


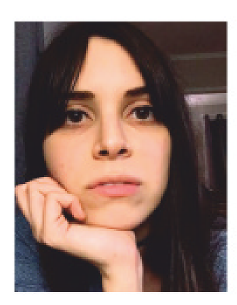


TOP **Many characters are sceptical that the world is about to end. "It furthers that mind game with yourself," Genevieve says. "Like, 'Is it ending? Do I need to be worried or not?'"** ABOVE **This dream sequence set in a train is gorgeous stuff. Puzzles revolve around a simple, but evergreen philosophy: often you must look back to move forward.** LEFT **The party condo is spacious, with a large main room, a few side rooms and a roof terrace. Some guests are a little too big to pull up a bean bag indoors**



SMALL TALK





From top: programmer Chris Chappelear; artist and game designer Gabrielle Genevieve

Parties are strange, otherworldly places. In a room filled with booze and strangers, emboldened by the paradoxical privacy afforded by chatter and thumping music, people transform. "Once, I went to this party," artist and game designer **Gabrielle Genevieve** says. "There was this guy there who I'd never met before. He's sitting next to me, and he just starts going off about his partner of seven years. He doesn't know if he loves them any more – and they're across the room, talking to somebody else, and he's like, completely letting his whole soul out onto me. It was kind of intense, and I was like, 'Oh, god'. He looked at me at the end and he said, 'I can't believe I told you all of that'. And I said, 'No, it's okay – sometimes you need to get it out'."

This was the first seed of *Small Talk*, a game set during a party at the end of the world. The condo is populated with curious guests, from a disembodied head to a giant gundam standing awkwardly with a party cup. It's almost intimidating: we shuffle around the room's edges, trying not to gawp, studying the surreal animated paintings hung on the walls while we work up the courage to approach someone. "It's interesting hearing how people's playthroughs go, because it's sometimes indicative of how people actually go to a party," Genevieve says.

Indeed, there's a not unfamiliar sense of feeling out of place. Eyes and faces follow you: a *Doom*-style billboarding effect on the characters augments self-consciousness, the mix of 2D people in a 3D world uncanny. "I think part of the 'outsiderness' is wanting to explore the things that people don't feel comfortable about," programmer **Chris Chappelear** says. "Finding a setting that can create a level of comfort around that, as much as is possible. A lot of the time that doesn't exist in reality, and so having it be at the end of the world helps with this idea that, okay, I might as well let it all out at this point."

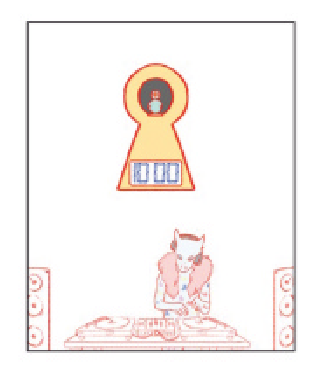
Indeed, one minute we're making polite chit-chat with an onion as goldfish swim around in its trousers; the next, listening to a man with a plate of eggs and bacon for a face reminisce about his childhood. We presume we've hit it off with Breakfast Head when we're transported into his mind palace, where a mother bird nests peacefully with sentient eggs before presenting us with one filled with 'Eggman's Bacon Bits'.

It gets weirder – and steadily more heartfelt. A girl split between dimensions is having trouble reconciling the different parts of herself with the overwhelming choices available to her: we hop up platforms in her head towards a starry sky to meet the pieces of her personality. Another guest pulls us into a maze of bookshelves. At the end stands a strange, inconsolable creature lamenting a lost relationship – it's slightly silly, but with a tinge of pain. Some spaces are comforting, others unsettling; sometimes they are both. Puzzles are narrative riddles rather than brainteasers, a way to physically work though whatever abstract, often mundane difficulty the character is trying to navigate.

And some of the guests at the party even ask about *our* life: the hopes, dreams and insecurities we may have. We find ourselves looking inward, prompted by these Barnum effect conversations with friendly symbols. "If you look at the way the writing is structured, it's ambiguous," Genevieve says. "It's worded in such a way where it's like, 'This can apply to me, too.' It's a very aesthetic-heavy game, so it draws people in with its strange characters and creatures, and it kind of does this bait and switch. It's bright and happy-looking, and then it's like, oh shit, it's sad!" she laughs. "That's exactly what we want – now you're thinking about yourself."

> *"It's bright and happy-looking, then it's like, oh shit, it's sad! That's exactly what we want"*

This is a quietly revelatory game for the modern age, both entertaining and oddly therapeutic. With so many games designed with escape in mind, *Small Talk* makes a case – and a space – for gently confronting yourself. "We've had people say they're about to cry in some spaces," Genevieve says. "It's just kind of opening that valve, and letting yourself take what you need out of it, which is definitely one of our big goals." ■



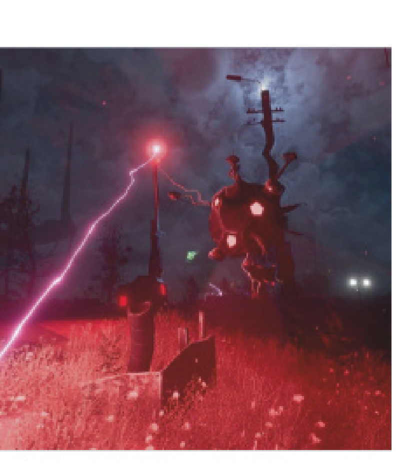
Apocalypse now

As the night wears on, the clock ticks over, and you'll start to see some worrying signs of the impending armageddon: fish falling from the sky, meteors crashing to earth. "They drop things into the world – there'll be fish on the ground, and characters will also drop things into the world," Chappelear says. Guests will move positions around the party, and more will arrive throughout the evening – despite the bad omens. "We want to have the first couple of events be something that's relatable," Genevieve says. "But then we want to push the world in other, more uncanny ways, where maybe it's even affecting the player somehow. We definitely want to have more abstraction in that direction for furthering the end of the world sequences."

Developer/publisher Big Robot
Format PC
Origin UK
Release 2019







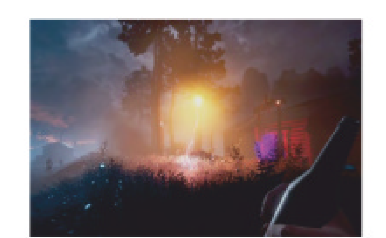
THE LIGHT KEEPS US SAFE

Big Robot goes dark with a scary, stealthy survival adventure

The light might well keep you safe, but after the blue-sky sci-fi of *The Signal From Tölva*, Big Robot's latest is a return to much darker territory. And we're not just talking about the colour palette – while *Sir, You Are Being Hunted* offered a more playful brand of scare, this is the studio adopting the tone and tenor of serious horror. Set in a desolate, procedurally generated world patrolled by twitchy machines – instructively, the first area you visit (and the game's original working title) is Bleak Road – it all but demands to be played with the lights down and the volume up. "We do atmospheric stuff pretty well," creative lead **Jim Rossignol** says. No kidding.

For all its danger, it's a weirdly alluring place – certainly more so than the dingy, grotty little bunker you find yourself in at the start. Encouraged to venture outside by a woman's voice – Burnistoun's Louise Stewart strikes a fittingly stark, sombre tone – you'll find yourself exploring a world built around a high-contrast aesthetic that gives you landmarks you can easily pick out from a distance, with bright lights representing both danger and opportunity. A red glow in the distance might mean a building full of supplies; it will also, almost certainly, mean there are machines nearby to distract or disable before you can get inside and grab them.

It's a survival game of sorts, then, but it's not one where you constantly need to fret about food and medical supplies – it's fairly generous on that front. And it's not a Roguelike either: dying doesn't mean having to start over. Your job, at least in the early stages, is to gradually upgrade your modular flashlight, which over time becomes a multi-tool that steadily allows you to venture



ABOVE **Bottles come in handy until you've found enough components to upgrade your flashlight: one beam temporarily disables smaller enemies once alerted**

You'll have to return to the bunker to power up your torch, but this strange device also needs to be brought back online. You'll need to locate some kind of fuel source first, you're told







LEFT **No prizes for guessing what your flashlight's Dissolver Beam can do**



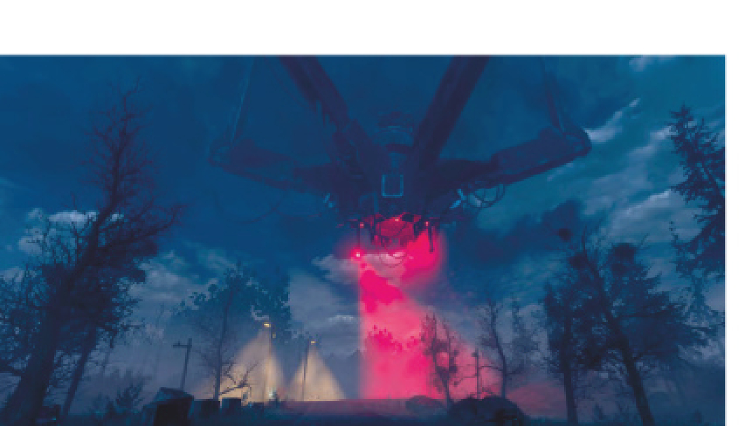
TOP LEFT **Rossignol rightly acknowledges there are plenty of "gloomy, dark, horror-y worlds" out there, but *Light* is instantly identifiable as a Big Robot game. "One of our keystones has always been: make sure people can recognise your game from the screenshot"** ABOVE **If you think the robots sound horrible, you should hear the noise when you take fall damage. Rossignol laughs mischievously: "I can't remember which game it was, but there's something out there that has *the* most horrific ankle-breaking noises. I've always had that bookmarked in my head: fall damage needs to sound like you're crunching cartilage"**

further, and tackle enemy threats without quite so much running, hiding or bottle-throwing. It factors into exploration and puzzle-solving in some surprising ways, which shouldn't be spoiled at this stage – not least since they're potentially subject to change.

Perhaps it's not quite the game you were expecting; indeed, Rossignol suggests that the audience response so far has been quite the eye-opener. "The extent to which people's assumptions define their experience is really fascinating to watch," he says. "The procgen doesn't really demand death and replay, as you'll have already experienced. But there's a whole bunch of people reporting on the game as if that's how it is, which is really weird. So we almost feel like maybe we should adapt it to meet expectations if the messaging isn't there. Having spent months alone in this development environment, all these different understandings come into play and you start having to consider, well, do we need to develop to specifically address some of that stuff?"

Don't worry – *Light* isn't about to become more generic just to meet player expectations.

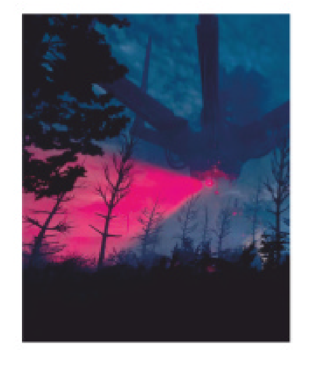
The studio has discussed potentially adding challenge modes – the foundations to add new game types are already in place



"We don't really want to make the same game as everybody else," Rossignol continues. "We can't really jettison that approach and still be making Big Robot games. It's partly genre expectations, but it's partly structural on our part – if you want someone to play a game in a certain way you have to teach them to do it. So yeah, that's definitely our job." He suggests that the game has been built in such a way that it could potentially be bent into entirely new shapes. Indeed, it began as something more akin to a road trip before the hub structure was incorporated, while the light element only came into play late on; Rossignol had scribbled 'the light keeps you safe' on a Post-It note, originally conceiving of "a procedural Lordran" where the player would carry a blazing torch and light lanterns to make their way through the world.

If there's plenty that will likely change between now and the final release, that stiflingly potent atmosphere needs no adjustment. Through headphones, the insectoid clicks and whirrs produced by the robotic enemies prove even more unsettling. And the low-level ambience is punctuated by startlingly loud diegetic sounds when you are spotted, making for a more palatable brand of jump-scare than the hackneyed use of orchestral bursts. It's a technique Rossignol clearly loves. "When stuff does happen – BANG!" he shouts, clapping for emphasis. "It's suddenly very loud and that can be very intimidating. I think that kind of contrast is really exciting. If you're able to marry visual contrast with audio contrast when you're doing something like that, then the effect is even greater." Our shattered nerves are testament to that. ■

"If you want someone to play a game in a certain way you have to teach them to do it"



Light reading

The most important lesson Big Robot has learned from the Early Access period so far has been that audiences are more likely to want "a big chunk of stuff" from each update, rather than a more piecemeal delivery. That includes narrative elements; originally, there was more for players to read and discover about the world, but for the time being, *Light*'s players are happy to wait for the lore. "A few people I've spoken to have said, 'I bought the game but actually I'm not going to play it until the story's in'," Rossignol says. "They'd rather have the whole thing, and I'm comfortable with that as well – that feels like the right response to me. And so we're happy just to leave that until we do a big story update where we can address everything at once."

Developer/publisher PhiGames
Format PC
Origin UK
Release TBA







RECOMPILE

This hack-happy Metroidvania's raw energy powers our curiosity

The dash hits us like a ton of bricks. Our enemy doesn't get off lightly either. Plucked from a fizzling orb atop a staircase of shattered cubes, the ability allows us to barrel directly into a laser-eyed sentry turret, smashing it apart. But for us, the real impact is in the animation, not its result. Pressing the dash button results in a precious few frames of windup – anticipation and pressure crackling like electricity – before the movement unleashes itself, searing across the screen. There's something about that tiny delay that makes the power we've just acquired feel even more significant, the precocious little rocket punch raring to go every single time.

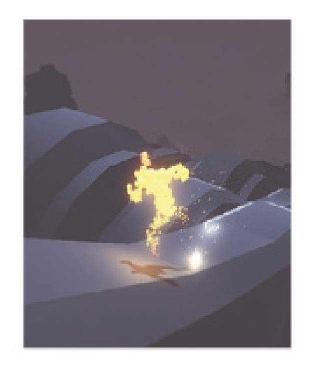
It makes a lot of sense: *Recompile* is a Metroidvania in which you play as a humanoid distillation of pure energy, a rogue piece of code. Part precision platformer, part shooter and part hacking puzzler, it's certainly compelling to control, even at this early stage of development. The open-ended level we enter is a wasteland of strange code

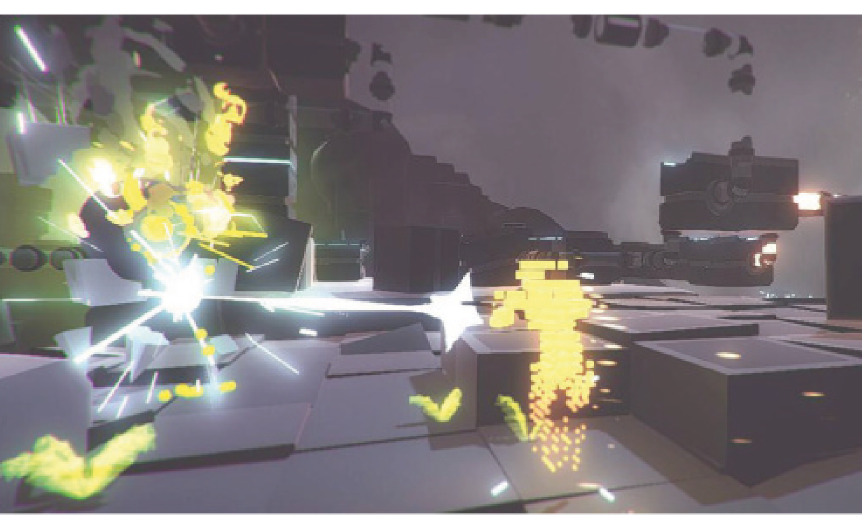
The *Rez*-like effect of *Recompile*'s protagonist is rendered using instanced cube meshes with a custom shader. The bright glow makes the avatar stand out in a dark environment





LEFT **The holographic effects are beautiful, but can be confusing. We spend a while agonising about how to jump a gap, before realising the translucent platform before us can be walked on**





TOP LEFT **It's possible we'll see a few different kinds of guns in the final game: this shot suggests a longer-range weapon in the making.** ABOVE **Shooting might not be terribly satisfying just yet, but the voxelly death animations cretainly are**

rearranging itself into new shapes – in a purely visual sense, we hasten to add, the glitchy fog of war retreating the further we run. Tapping jump lets us tumble nimbly through the air and avoid incoming fire from skittering cuboid turrets.

Our first method of fighting back against the pests is a lightning gun, aimed with the left trigger and fired with the right. The effect is deliciously sci-fi, a web of electricity coursing over our target. We shock it again, and again. For several moments, we wonder whether this isn't some kind of stun gun instead of a damage-dealing weapon. Eventually, however, after 15 or 20 shots, our enemy explodes. Our demo handler admits that they may have underestimated the damage values somewhat for this particular build.

Then again, the currently underpowered gun is ample encouragement to explore and experiment with *Recompile*'s other elements. After collecting the thrilling dash ability next, we're not sure we'd want to go back to the peashooter even if it *were* fixed, the melee smash so mighty that we're content to bash through enemies in an endless chain of brutality. The double jump ability we find later lets us spring higher before we fall back down to the ground in a perfect simulacrum of a superhero landing, shockwaves rippling out from our kneeling avatar as the camera trembles. But there's a catch: during one timed platforming challenge which we begin by starting up a circuit's flow, we abuse the double jump to try to reach the pinnacle faster, and soon discover that the recovery time on the landing is actively hampering our effort. Precision and restraint is the key.

In future *Recompile* puzzles, however, we'll have something else on our side: the ability to hack enemies and aspects of the environment. We're shown a brief glimpse of the interface, although it's not fully implemented just yet. A button press causes the screen to pulse into a blue overlay, UI elements superimposed upon it as we coldly examine our enemies' health bars, hostility levels, aggro status and their projected paths across the level.

In future we'll have the ability to hack enemies and aspects of the environment

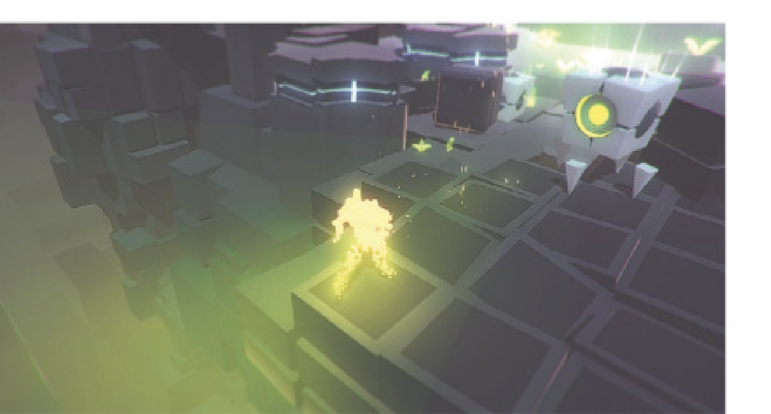
A special kind of flora, harvested using the lightning gun, will help power the ability. And you'll definitely want to keep it topped up, as we're told you'll even be able to turn enemies against each other.

With multiple ways to defeat foes, move past obstacles and solve puzzles, your actions will affect the fate of your bright little sliver of machine sentience. There are six variations planned in total: the exact nature of the technological singularity you achieve will depend on your specific approach. It seems *Recompile*'s gently systemic, sandbox-style levels will prove arresting even beyond the gorgeous shimmer of voxels – and that dash. We're still recovering. ■

Light speed

All sorts of fun, broken things have been purposefully left in our demo, including an infinite double jump that practically begs us to try to find the upper limit of the level's skybox. Perhaps unsurprisingly, PhiGames has intentionally designed levels for competitive speedrunners, who will no doubt rejoice in finding the most efficient routes through the open-ended areas. The current dev record for the first area stands at around two minutes (our casual playthrough takes about ten times that). Whether the deliberately broken versions of *Recompile*'s movement abilities will be included as Easter eggs in the final game remains to be seen, but they'd certainly make for entertaining extra speedrun categories.

Despite their faintly adorable appearance, the enemy turrets' objective is to 'delete' you, a rogue piece of code in the system



VOID BASTARDS

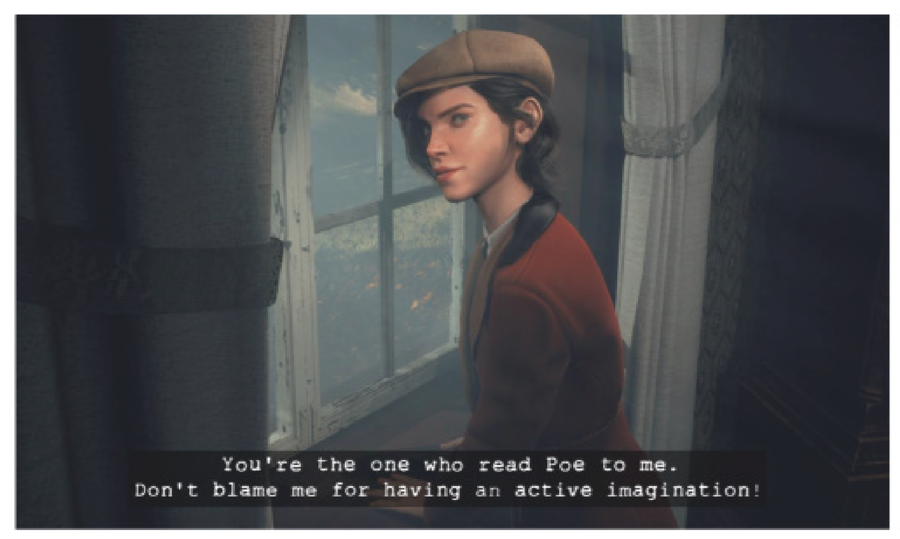
Developer/publisher Blue Manchu **Format** PC, Xbox One **Origin** Australia, UK, US **Release** 2019



A change of pace for the studio behind ***Card Hunter***, ***Void Bastards*** is pitched as a kind of firstperson ***XCOM***, with elements of ***Heat Signature*** and ***The Swindle***. Choosing your squad from an apparently endless supply of space convicts, your job is to scavenge and steal from a succession of spacecraft. It's strategy with a dash of spontaneity, then: a top-down map lets you plan your route to the loot, while you adapt to hazards and enemies on the fly, with the help of craftable weapons including a remote detonating cat-bot. With a bright comic-book aesthetic, it looks fantastic, too.

DRAUGEN

Developer/publisher Red Thread Games **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Norway **Release** 2019



This firstperson Nordic noir from the ***Dreamfall Chapters*** studio has changed quite a bit since its initial unveiling four years ago. It's now more moody psychodrama than twisted horror, casting you as an unravelling American looking for his missing sister with a companion who may not be all she seems. As with ***Dreamfall***, don't expect much in the way of traditional point-and-click-style riddles. The developer calls it "a character study, not a puzzle or action game."

BLAZING CHROME

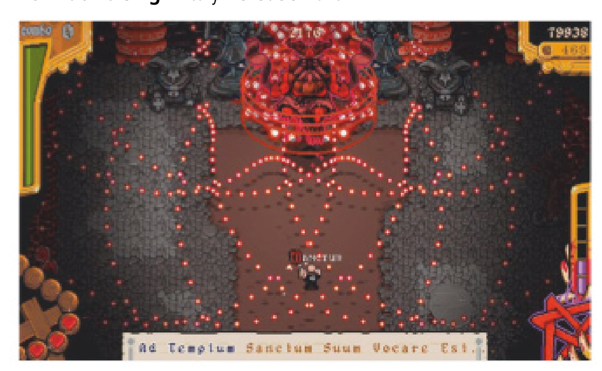
Developer Joymasher **Publisher** The Arcade Crew
Format PC, PS4, Switch **Origin** Brazil **Release** 2019



This lovingly unreconstructed 16bit-styled action game has a level of variety that's reminiscent of Treasure in its heyday. It's a ***Contra***-like side-scroller that spins off into frantic hoverbike pursuits, into-the-screen jetpack sequences and vertically-scrolling set-pieces against giant mechanical bosses.

THE TEXTORCIST

Developer Morbidware **Publisher** Headup Games
Format PC **Origin** Italy **Release** 2019



Like playing ***Typing Of The Dead*** and Cave's ***Guwange*** at the same time, this shooter asks you to guide an exorcist away from hails of bullets while tapping out incantations to destroy the demons spitting them. If your multitasking skills aren't up to scratch, plugging in a gamepad lets you access Rookie mode.

MONSTER SANCTUARY

Developer/publisher Moi Rai Games
Format PC, Switch **Origin** Germany **Release** 2020



Pitched as a fusion of ***Pokémon*** and ***Metroid***, lone developer Denis Sinner's appealing hybrid more than quadrupled its Kickstarter goal, unlocking a Switch version to follow its PC debut. It's some way off yet, but this could well be another ***Stardew Valley***-esque success story.



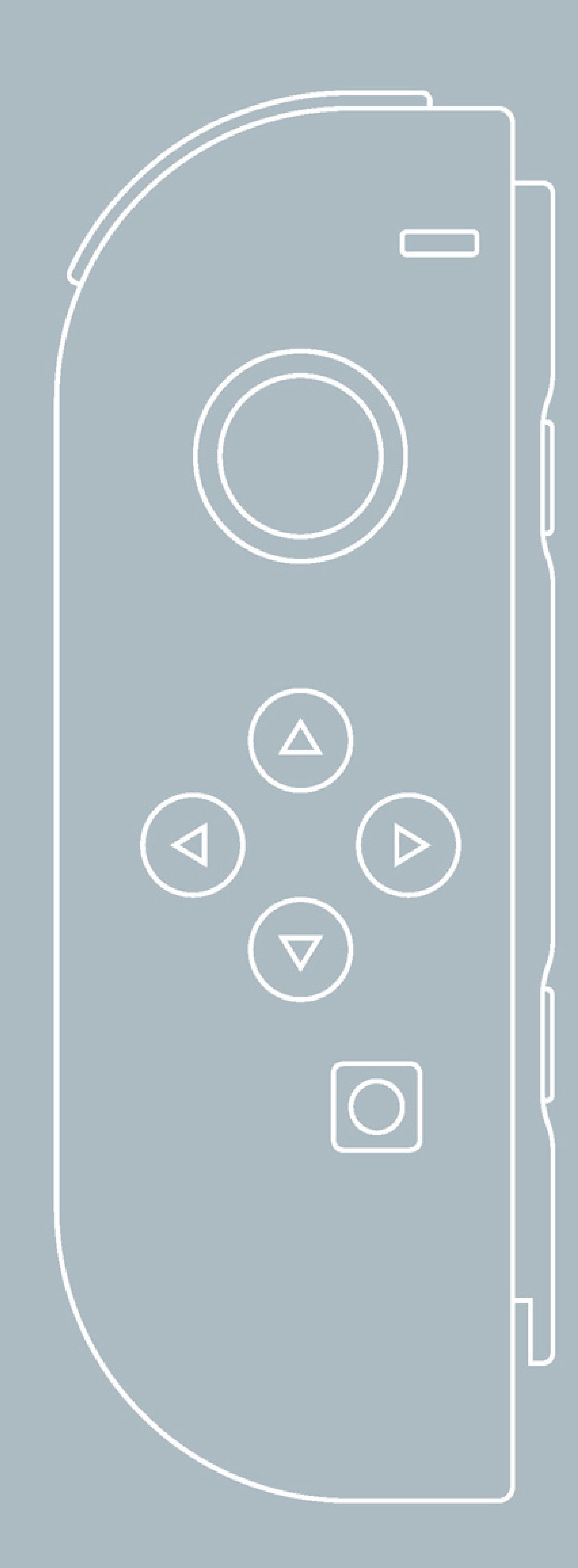
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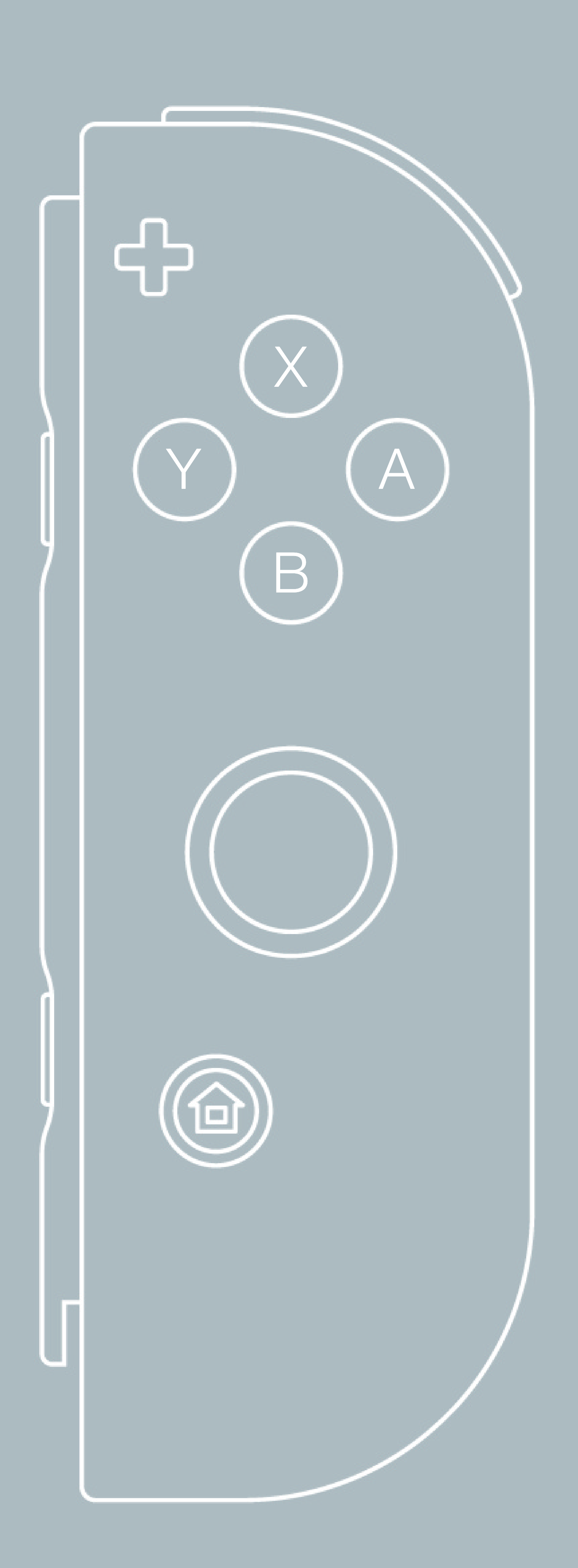
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NE
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How the house of Mario rebuilt itself to deliver a console for the ages

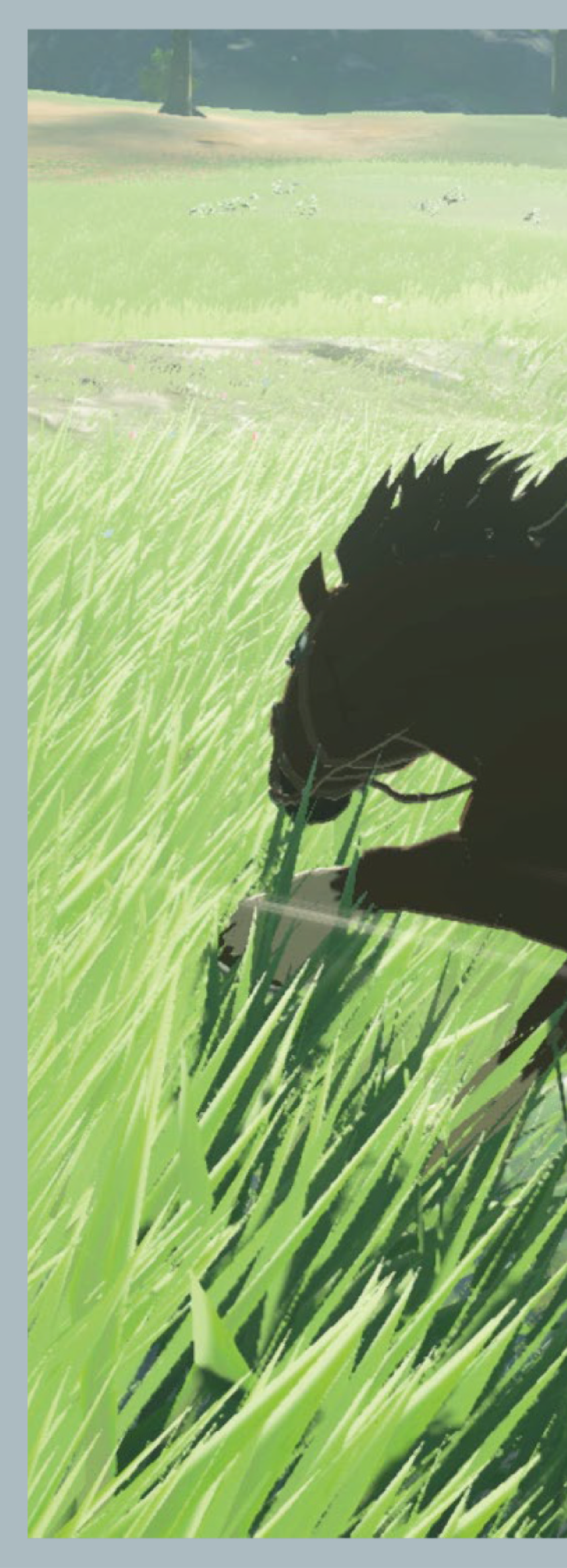
By Nathan Brown

Look, you don't get to live to 25 without getting a few things wrong. Everyone that knows **Edge** has their own personal axe to grind with it, and while we'll happily set you straight on that *Doom* review, the *Double Dash* score or whatever else you bear a grudge over, we're happy – delighted, actually – to admit that we were wrong about Switch.

Nintendo unveiled its new console at a series of events around the world in January 2017, and the mood among the hacks assembled at the Hammersmith Apollo that day was dour. There was much to like about this mad little thing that sought to unite Nintendo's home-console and handheld divisions in a single system. What we found was a console that was overpriced, whose swollen feature set meant it had no clear value proposition, and a "miserably barren" launch line-up. "The resulting impression," we wrote in **E**303, "is of a console that, by offering so much, has been forced into a series of compromises." Oops.

In our defence, we weren't alone, and what should have been a raucous coming-out party was instead seen as a wake. Media and players around the world put the boot in, and Nintendo's stock ended the day down by six per cent. Fast forward to today, however, and Nintendo has been proven right. Switch launched in March and by the end of the year had already racked up two **Edge** 10s – the first console ever to do so in its first 12 months – and surpassed Wii U's lifetime sales figures. By the end of this September, sales were approaching 23 million, and Nintendo had posted its best quarterly results in almost a decade. Its stock price has doubled since Switch launched (though it has tailed off significantly in recent months, after investors realised, with some shock, that they shouldn't expect a one-two punch like *BOTW* and *Odyssey* every year). Three-and-a-half years after Satoru Iwata's sudden death left a company reeling, Nintendo's fortunes have been transformed.

Many tech companies, buoyed by such success, would come out swinging. But Nintendo doesn't really work like that. **Yoshiaki Koizumi**, the deputy general manager of Nintendo's Entertainment and Planning Division (EPD) who was general producer of the Switch project, is modest in the extreme about it all. He simply sees the console's success as a plan that came off. "When we first conceived of Switch internally, we really wanted to create a console that would appeal to a wide variety of people who play games," he tells us. "It's been really gratifying to see all kinds of people enjoying it – some of them playing games for the first time, and having fun playing together in new ways." ▶





Breath Of The Wild gave Switch the perfect start; rare indeed is the console that launches with a game that receives universal acclaim





Yoshiaki Koizumi (left) and Shinya Takahashi smile for the cameras, despite what we assume is a quite brutal *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* battle playing out on screen

His boss, EPD general manager **Shinya Takahashi**, goes a little further. "Before Switch released, I was asked in interviews how I would judge whether it was a success. Back then I answered that, since Wii and Nintendo DS were enjoyed by quite a wide range of people, I would like to make the same happen for Nintendo Switch as well. This goal has not changed since then. Since release, we've steadily made progress towards it, but there are still some people that are yet to try out Switch. We want to continue communicating the unique things that make Nintendo Switch special."

But this was not simply a matter of a company deciding to make a different type of console, and doing it. Nintendo has changed significantly since Iwata was replaced by Tatsumi Kimishima, the former company CFO (Kimishima, whose appointment was only ever meant to be transitional, stood down earlier in June, replaced by Shuntaro Furukawa). In September 2015 Nintendo announced a company-wide restructure of which the headline element was the merger of its two main development teams. Entertainment Analysis and Development, or EAD, was combined with Software Planning and Development, or SPD, to form Entertainment Planning and Development. EPD would be a one-stop shop for every Nintendo game, whether for a handheld, a home console or a smartphone. It also marshalls the company's sprawling IP portfolio.

A similar move was made on the hardware side, unifying the two teams previously responsible for hardware development and system software. But it's the unification of the game teams that's made the more obvious difference. With Switch, a hybrid of handheld and home console, in the works, Nintendo had no need for two teams working on different kinds of games. While 3DS would still be supported, Switch was the clear focus. And a new type of console required a fresh approach to game development.

"It certainly had an influence," Takahashi says of the restructure. "But that influence was not limited only to the team members who are directly involved in game development. The merger also created an environment that facilitated information sharing among producers, as well as conversations among various leaders, including Mr Koizumi and myself.

"Was it difficult? Well, it's different organisations merging, so it's about how both sides can accept each other's different cultures. There were challenges similar to a marriage, if that makes sense [laughs]." ▶

For all the logic in adding themed content to ports of older thirdparty games, you have to question the wisdom of adding Link to *Skyrim* in a post-*BOTW* world

CARDBOARD COMPUTER

In a previous era, an experiment like Labo would have drawn ire, rather than acclaim. Why is Nintendo wasting its time on cardboard when it should be patching the gaps in its console's release list? Yet with software support no problem, Labo can be taken on its own terms – a carefree, gently bonkers yet ingenious invention from the only videogame company bold enough to try it. The two packs available at launch were later joined by a third, and Koizumi confirms Nintendo is thinking about it in the longer term as well. Takahashi, meanwhile, is thrilled at how it has already spread beyond the living room. "It's being used by teachers in classrooms in the UK, and there's a programme in cooperation with the Institute Of Play to distribute Labo in grade schools in the US. It's also being used in Italian museums as part of their education program. It makes me really happy to see."





Assassin's Creed Odyssey is playable on Switch in Japan via cloud streaming. It's something we'd love to see in the west as well

One of the principal goals in the formation of EPD was to improve how Nintendo allocates its resources. The fanbase die-hards who stuck with the company through the Wii U era had to endure some miserably long waits between firstparty releases, and while it was a problem throughout Wii U's lifespan, its roots can be traced back to before the console even launched. Unprepared for the extra development time that full-HD games required, Nintendo had to pull staff from other game teams to ensure Wii U's launch line-up was ready on time. That meant that projects planned to ship later in the console's life were pushed back. Wii U never really recovered.

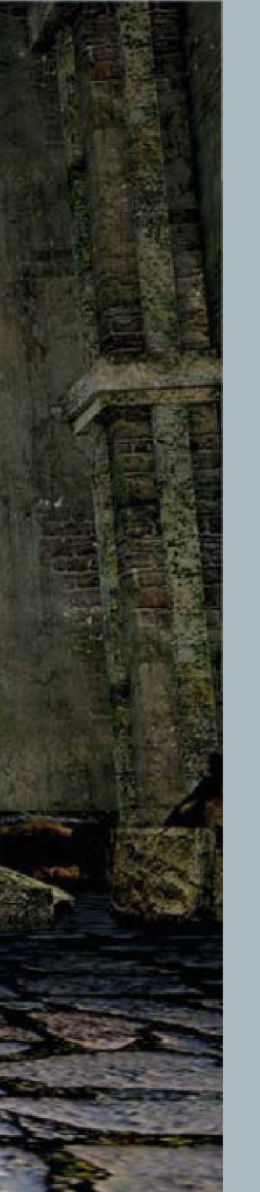
Nintendo, however, has. "Thanks to the merging of our software development teams," Koizumi says, "we are now more able to flexibly assign developers, based on the progress of each project." Standards of communication have improved too, he says, both within and without the company, and across borders, in a drive to ensure new Switch games are released globally at the same time.

For once, however, Nintendo's is not the only side of the story that matters. Yes, Switch's firstparty line-up is stellar – not just *Breath Of The Wild* and *Odyssey*, but also the likes of *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe*, *Splatoon 2* and the criminally overlooked *Arms*. Even the fallow days of Wii U have helped, in a way, with Nintendo able to pad out the Switch software schedule with expanded ports of the console's firstparty games such as *Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker*, *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze* and the forthcoming *New Super Mario Bros U Deluxe*. But Switch's success is about more than just Nintendo. In broader software terms this is the best-supported Nintendo console since the N64 days.

This did not happen by accident. Executives realised that the lack of thirdparty support, which had dogged Nintendo systems ever since the Gamecube, needed to be addressed. Thirdparties had found Wii U a pig to develop for: not only was it underpowered for its day, it also had a cumbersome toolchain, poor documentation and lengthy compile times. Off-the-shelf engines weren't the answer either: some reports claimed Unreal Engine 3, the dominant thirdparty engine on Xbox 360 and PS3, was never fully supported by Wii U's architecture, and Tomonobu Itagaki's team at Valhalla Studios had to work extensively on the source code to get it working in *Devil's Third*. Unreal Engine 4 launched early in 2014; Wii U, barely 18 months old, was not supported. Unity implementation was better, but did little to combat the perception that Nintendo simply hadn't properly considered the needs of thirdparties.

"From the initial development phase," Koizumi says, "it was always our intention to create a platform that would make it easy for thirdparty developers to produce games. We prepared development tools such as Unreal Engine 4 and Unity, and spoke to a lot of thirdparty developers and publishers about Nintendo Switch itself, as well as its possibilities."

THIRDPARTY SALES HAVE STRUGGLED ON NINTENDO PLATFORMS. OFF THE BACK OF SWITCH'S SUCCESS, ATTITUDES ARE CHANGING



The result has been remarkable, at least by Nintendo's standards. While Switch is not yet on the level of PS4 or Xbox One in terms of new thirdparty games, it's become home to a number of contemporary classics. While often cut down in technical terms, the promise of a *Skyrim*, *Dark Souls*, *Doom* or *Diablo III* in your work bag has come to form an irresistible part of the Switch value proposition. And new games will come. Publishers have learned to adopt a wait-and-see policy when it comes to Nintendo hardware; they know that early adopters are primarily interested in those world-beating firstparty games, and historically thirdparty sales have struggled on Nintendo platforms. Off the back of Switch's success, those attitudes are changing. The likes of *Resident Evil VII* and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* have been released in Japan, though they're only playable over an internet connection, the game files streamed from the cloud. More will follow, and sources indicate that things will soon change on the shop shelf as well. ▶





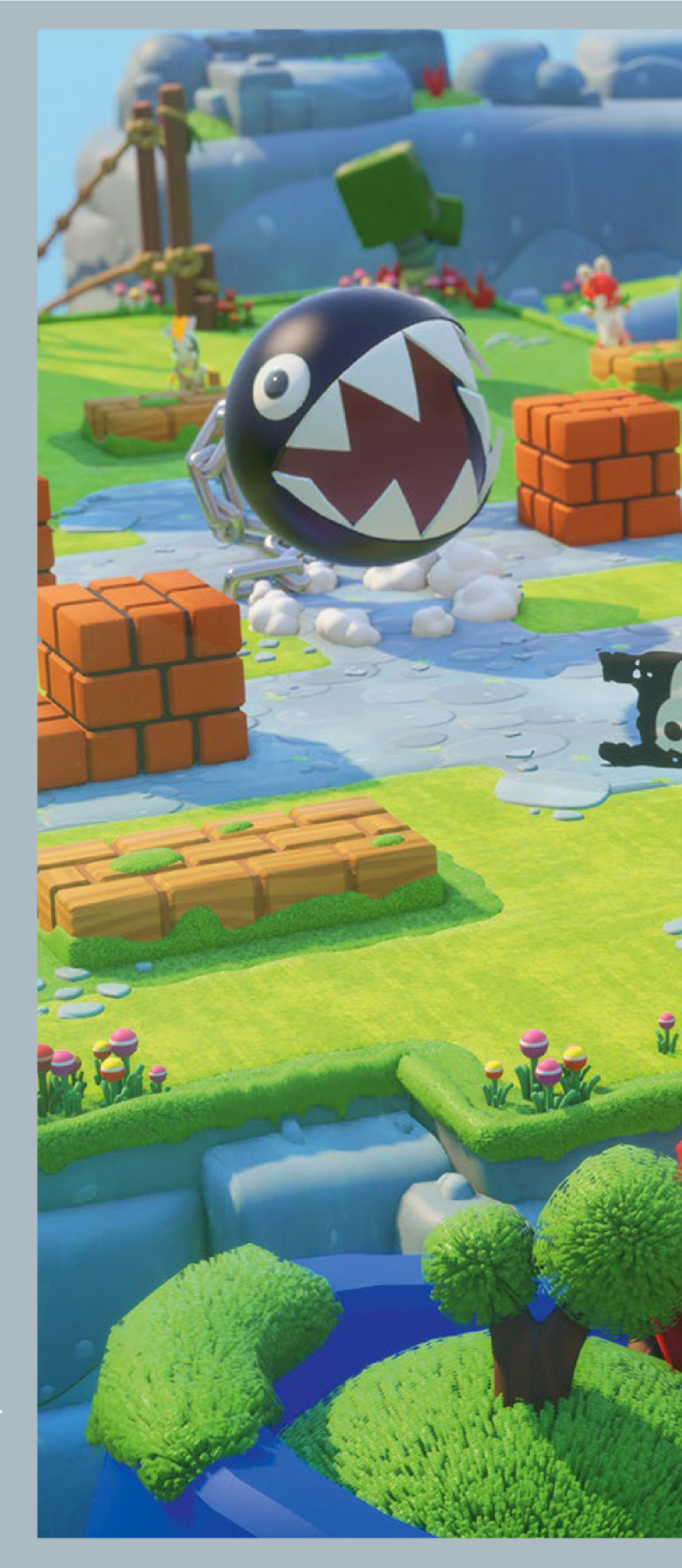
"IT WAS ALWAYS OUR INTENTION TO CREATE A PLATFORM THAT WOULD MAKE IT EASY FOR THIRDPARTY DEVELOPERS TO PRODUCE GAMES"

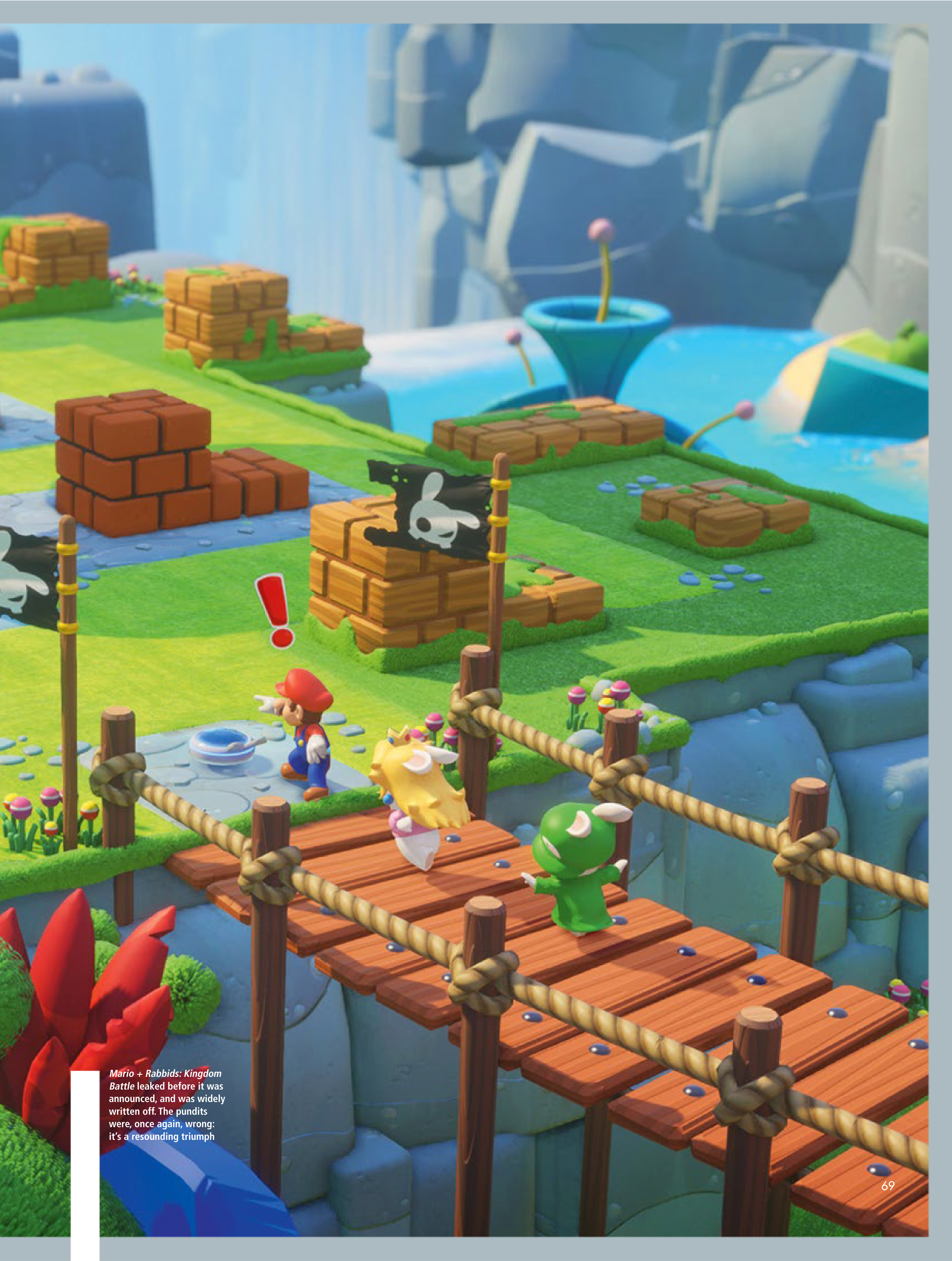
One of the most surprising supporters of Switch is Bethesda Softworks. For 30 years, the US publisher was an almost complete stranger to Nintendo; *Wayne Gretzky Hockey* and a *Terminator* tie-in launched for NES, but that was pretty much it. Yet it has been a vital part of Switch's success, its conversions of *Doom*, *Skyrim* and MachineGames' *Wolfenstein* titles helping reverse the trend of Nintendo systems being seen as home to Nintendo games, and little else of note.

Takahashi fondly remembers the first time he showed a prototype of Switch to Bethesda staff. "The opportunity wasn't something exclusive to Bethesda – we actually met with quite a few publishers to introduce them all to Switch. We gave them a demonstration of *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe*, explaining how it was super easy to share Joy-Con with other people, and how you could remove Switch from the dock and carry on playing outside. We had them play a prototype of *1-2 Switch*, too. I watched them having so much fun playing – even though it was so early in the morning! – and felt they really had understood the appeal."

The real jewel in Switch's thirdparty-publisher crown, however, is Ubisoft. The French company has enjoyed a fruitful relationship with Nintendo over the years, and its yield on Switch has been even better. One of the biggest of the many recent changes in the Kyoto company's business model is a loosening of the previously vice-like grip it had on its IP portfolio. DeNA, the Japanese mobile-gaming titan that has been charged with bringing Nintendo characters to smartphones, has certainly profited from this. But Ubisoft has gone a step further, developing games for Nintendo platforms using Nintendo characters, an honour previously limited to secondparty subsidiaries such as Retro Studios. *Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle* was a triumph, and Nintendo also loaned Ubisoft the *Star Fox* crew for its recently released toys-to-life space opera *Starlink: Battle For Atlas*. Ubisoft's core focus on sprawling, systemic open worlds means it is unlikely to ever go all-in on Switch, but no western publisher has had a greater hand in the system's early success.

This is not solely a story of big multinational companies, however. During the course of its 18 months on shelves Switch has established itself as a natural home for indie games. On the move, it has seamlessly filled the void left by the sad, slow death of PlayStation Vita; at home its detachable Joy-Cons ▶





Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle leaked before it was announced, and was widely written off. The pundits were, once again, wrong: it's a resounding triumph



Bastion was a hit on XBLA, but its presence on Switch feels more about symbolism than sales. Supergiant's second game, Transistor, has also been ported

make it a perfect fit for couch multiplayer games. In both instances its modest processing power compared to PS4 and Xbox One is still perfectly capable of playing all but the most ambitious of the current crop of indie games. And, like Bethesda and Nintendo itself have shown, a game's age is no barrier to entry. Switch is slowly becoming a repository for classic indie games of all eras.

It reflects a dramatic change in Nintendo's attitude towards indies, for all the company's attempts to downplay it. Koizumi points out that Nintendo was "working with indie developers before the release of Switch, during the Wii U era" – but developing for the strange dual-screen console was only possible with a dedicated devkit. In 2011, Nintendo Of America president Reggie Fils-Aimé famously proclaimed the company's lack of interest in working with "garage" developers; at the time, small shops couldn't get a development agreement from Nintendo without a proper business address. Even at the time, it felt like old-fashioned thinking. Soon, it would seem positively archaic. Now, clearly, it is ancient history.

"We've seen so many indie games from talented developers release for Nintendo Switch," Koizumi says. "It goes without saying that the fact that we prepared development environments that make it easier for indie developers, such as Unreal Engine 4 and Unity, contributed. There are also many titles using Game Maker Studio being released lately."

Takahashi, meanwhile, points to the way in which Nintendo has thrown its own marketing muscle behind the indie scene through regular dedicated Direct broadcasts. The most recent, in August, speaks to the breadth and depth of Switch's catalogue of independent games: from original XBLA darling *Bastion* to the brilliant *Undertale*, smartphone classic *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* to the forthcoming *Samurai Gunn 2*, and plenty more besides. "We've also worked to make high-quality indie games more widely available," Takahashi says, "by producing cards with download codes for retailers to sell. These sorts of efforts are helping consumers to more easily find interesting games that they perhaps wouldn't have otherwise encountered."

That sort of thing is vital given the size of Switch's game library. In a little over 18 months the catalogue has passed 1,000 titles, the agonising trickle of the Wii U era replaced with an absolute flood. It is that, perhaps more than any other single element, that most plainly displays the turnaround in fortunes that Switch has wrought. As the cliché has it, a console is only as good as its games. Switch has plenty, and while Nintendo's internally developed games remain the headline acts, they haven't been this well supported further down the bill since the halcyon days of the Super NES.

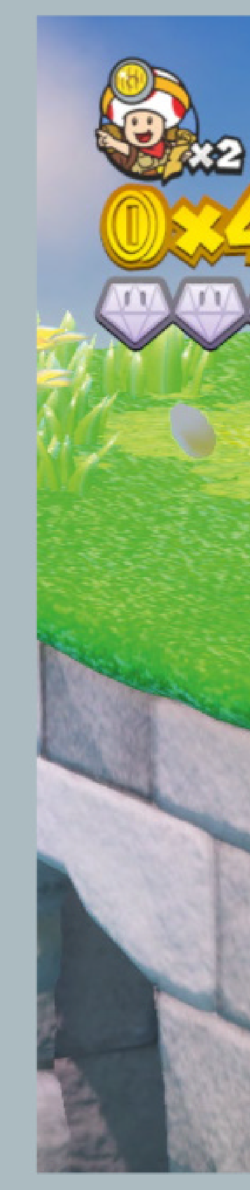
"BACK [IN THE '80S], THE NINTENDO OFFICE WAS SO LIVELY AND FULL OF EXCITEMENT. NOW IT'S JUST LIKE THAT ERA AGAIN"

Koizumi was around back then: his first project after joining Nintendo was designing and writing the manual for *A Link To The Past*. Takahashi was already there, joining in 1989 when the company was firing on every cylinder, buoyed by the success of NES.

"Back then, NES was doing great and people were very enthusiastic about it," Takahashi says. "The Nintendo office was so lively and full of excitement. Now it's just like that era again: the company is full of that excitement once more."

Switch has a way to go before it can be considered an equal of the defining home console, but it's certainly off to a flying start. With Nintendo's house in order following a sweeping restructure, thirdparties fully on board, indies flocking to Switch in droves and, of course, two **Edge** 10s under its belt already, Nintendo seems in ruder, more sustainable health than it has since its halcyon early days in the videogame business. That messy London launch event already feels like a lifetime ago. ■





Yoshi's Crafted World may appear to be a simple scrolling platformer, but stages have multiple planes which hide secrets and alternative routes



NEW HORIZONS

After a stellar opening year, Switch has had a quiet 2018 in software terms, as the natural consequences of launching a mainline *Mario* and *Zelda* game in the same year come to pass. Nintendo's stock price may have suffered as a result, but the one-two winter punch of new *Smash Bros* and *Pokémon* games should put investors in better mood – and while Nintendo is keeping its plans for 2019 close, the future already looks bright. Of those confirmed for release next year, *Luigi's Mansion 3*, *Yoshi's Crafted World* and *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* are the highlights, but hopes are high that other announced games – including *Metroid Prime 4*, *Animal Crossing* and *Bayonetta 3* – will join them. And the company is bound to have a few surprises up its sleeve too. The investment community, one suspects, won't stay grumpy for long.



AN AUDIENCE WITH…

MASAHIRO SAKURAI

The man behind Kirby on what goes into making a Smash hit

By Chris Schilling

According to Nintendo Treehouse's Nate Bihldorff, **Masahiro Sakurai** approaches each new *Smash Bros* "as if it's the last". That's patently obvious from the games, which practically groan under the weight of the new elements that are added each time, but also from the stories about Sakurai himself. While overseeing the orchestral recording for the soundtrack of *Super Smash Bros Melee*, he collapsed from fatigue, and was briefly hospitalised. More recently, during the development of the 3DS and Wii U entries, Sakurai ended up injuring his right arm through overwork, leaving him unable to personally engage in the rigorous testing he insists his games undergo.

Happily, it seems Sakurai is managing his workload rather better these days, though the creator of *Kirby* and *Super Smash Bros* doesn't look like a man who's ever burned the candle at both ends: at 48 years of age, he could pass for at least a decade younger. He keeps himself fit, exercising while he plays, but it's his youthful exuberance for videogames that seems to be keeping him young. Sakurai varies his gaming diet, playing everything from retro games (often as research for characters making their *Smash* debut, whether as part of the playable cast or a minor cameo) to the latest western blockbusters. He evidently enjoys writing about games, too: he has a regular column in Famitsu, while throughout the development of *Super Smash Bros Brawl*, he posted on the Smash Bros Dojo website every weekday, drip-feeding new information to Nintendo fans who lapped up every update for the better part of a year.

These days it's *Smash*, rather than *Kirby*, for which he's best known, and so that inevitably dominates any conversation with Sakurai. Here, he reflects upon the challenges of meeting fan expectations, the importance of listening to less vocal players, and his time working alongside Satoru Iwata.

What first sparked the idea to develop a fourplayer fighting game – particularly given that it wasn't a big-selling genre at the time?

Smash Bros was designed during the golden age of fighting games, when they were popular in arcades. In contrast to those fighting games back then, where the best players were those who could pull off the most complex predetermined combos, I wanted to design something which added an element of improvisation. There were two games that I designed and made for the N64 and *Smash Bros* was one of them. The N64 had four controller ports, which was perfect for the game I had in mind: a game that didn't involve any complicated command inputs and that everyone could have fun playing together using simple controls.

You worked on that first prototype with Satoru Iwata. Did your relationship with him give you the confidence that your pitch would be accepted by Nintendo? What did you learn from working with him?

Mr Iwata was the one who handled all the programming for this prototype. At the time, I had only recently started working with 3D tools, but still took care of planning, modelling and character movements. One other person worked on the audio. So initially we only had three staff members. Mr Iwata told me that he really enjoyed programming for *Smash Bros*, because another game he was working on in a different team was going through some really difficult times. Although I was the one who came up with the idea of having an all-star cast of Nintendo characters, it was Mr Iwata who did a lot of the work for this negotiation. Fighting games need to have multiple star characters, so I imagined that it would be a hard sell on home consoles if it had a completely new set of fighters. That's why I wanted to have Nintendo's characters if I could.

It's been said that you left HAL Laboratory because you didn't want to keep making *Kirby* games. Yet you've spent almost your entire career making *Smash Bros* with Nintendo. What changed?

There's been some kind of misunderstanding about that. I never said that I didn't want to make *Kirby* games. I think what I talked about in the past, about it being difficult to create a new game if I just stayed at HAL, has been twisted somehow. I wouldn't mind working anywhere as long as I get to create new things. I'm making *Smash Bros* because Nintendo has asked me to, and because I feel it's a project that I should prioritise above all else if I'm asked to do it. If I create a new game, that may be one more great, fun game people can play – but by making *Smash Bros* I can create something with more value and wide-reaching effects. However, I definitely don't feel like I am stuck in a rut doing similar things. Every time I add lots of new things, and I feel that it's a job I always enjoy.





CV

Masahiro Sakurai was in his teens when he joined HAL Laboratory, where he almost immediately created one of Japan's best-loved characters. Kirby was a happy accident, a simple test character that became the star of his own game. By 1992, *Kirby's Dream Land* was released, and Sakurai, still just 21, had his first hit. He directed two more *Kirby* games (1993's *Adventure* and 1996's *Super Star*) before working on a prototype for a fourplayer fighting game that would go on to define his career. Sakurai left HAL in 2003 to establish his own company, Sora Ltd, in theory so he could become a freelance developer. Still, every game he's released since – including 2005 puzzle game *Meteos* and 2012's *Kid Icarus: Uprising* – has been published by Nintendo.

Tetsuya Mizuguchi, with whom you worked on *Meteos*, says you have a natural instinct for game balance. How on Earth do you balance a fighting game with more than 70 characters?

I already have a rough idea for the overall characteristics of fighters from the planning stage, and when I create instructions for the character movements I may go into detail describing things like on which frames attacks should trigger. We have a team doing testing to provide feedback, and a team working on balancing the game. The testing team plays battles daily while the latter team works on making the adjustments. This setup is similar to what we've had before, but what's different is its scale. However, if I let them have their way, they may try too hard to make the game fair, with the result of characters ending up playing too similarly. So I involve myself daily to point out potential problems which could cause this. I don't directly enter in any data myself anymore, though.

You took a rare departure from *Smash Bros* with *Kid Icarus: Uprising*. In the west at least, it was divisive – it had plenty of passionate fans but had its share of detractors, too. Looking back on it now, how do you feel about it?

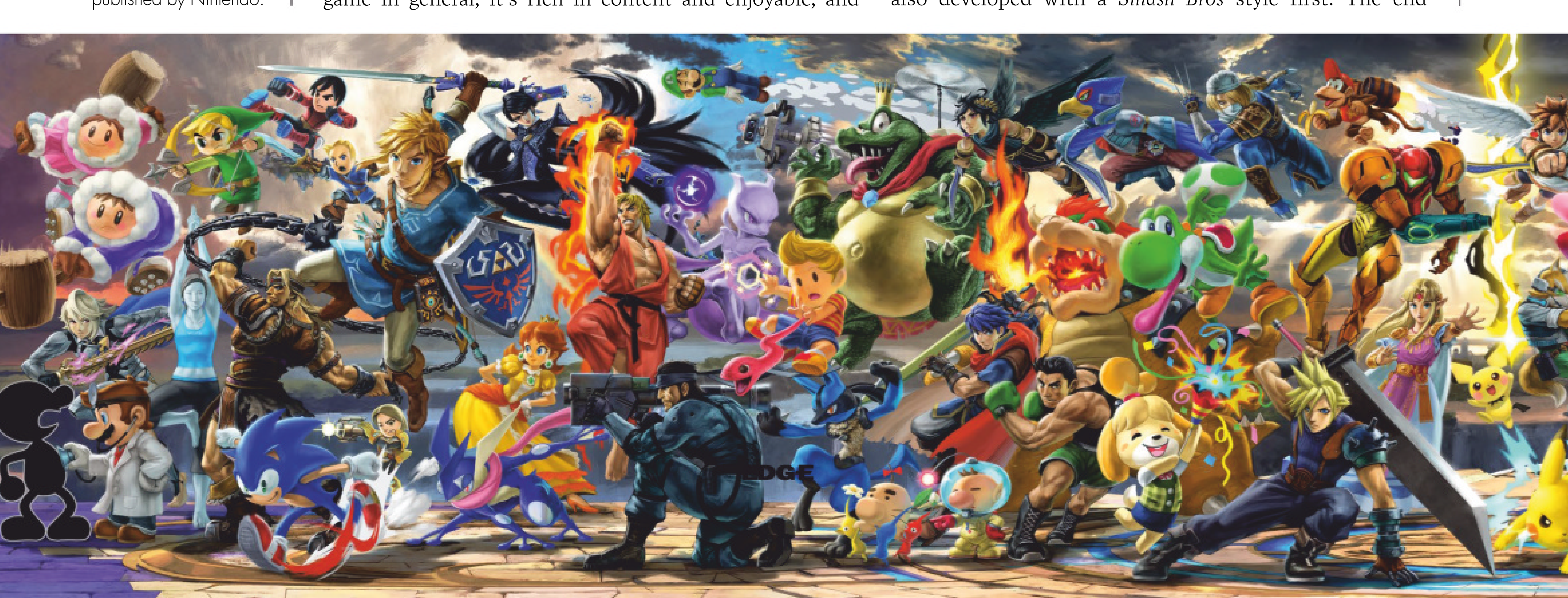
I could say that this was close to becoming the most difficult project in my entire career, both in terms of the team and the hardware. The team I had gathered differed greatly in culture and ways of thinking, so there was always confrontation. In addition, back when we were developing the game, we still couldn't make full use of the power of Nintendo 3DS. Some improvements in aspects such as the middleware were made later on, but since the game was being made in the initial stages of Nintendo 3DS development, we had a really hard time doing what we wanted to. For example, I only found out that the Circle Pad Pro was going to be coming out when it was announced to the public by Nintendo. I wanted to make the game support this properly if I could, but this was impossible due to performance-related reasons. As a game in general, it's rich in content and enjoyable, and people have even asked for a modern port. However, I don't think this will be possible.

You've previously said you don't think of *Smash Bros* as a competitive game, and don't design it as such. Yet the game has become a tremendously popular esport. Has that affected your approach when designing *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*?

Personally, I'm happy as long as different people can all enjoy the game in the way that they like. Although I've added lots of features such as items and Spirits into the game, if people enjoy playing only Final Destination and without any items or random elements, that's fine as well. I also welcome the idea of playing it as an esport. I want this game to be something that will embrace the wide range of different ways that people play. If we only focus on areas that get the most attention, such as the esports or competitive aspects, then the game will fail to maintain this stance. In fact, I think it is important to pay attention to children or families whose voices may not be as loud.

You've brought in a host of non-Nintendo characters to *Smash Bros*, which must pose challenges. Which ones did you find particularly difficult to get right? How much do you collaborate with the original developers to reinvent these characters for *Smash* while ensuring they stay true to their creators' vision?

There are cases where I will meet with the original creators myself once or twice, but in general communication is carried out through Nintendo. In addition, it wouldn't necessarily be the original creator I would meet – rather like how I was directly involved with the *Kirby* series, but don't know about other projects now. We've made various changes so that both cartoonish and realistic characters can appear on the same screen together with it seeming natural, and the characters still looking cool. Character movements are also developed with a *Smash Bros* style first. The end



“WHAT’S IMPORTANT IS THAT THE CHARACTER HAS SOME KIND OF CHARACTERISTIC OR FIGHTING STYLE THAT IS UNIQUE TO THEM”



result from this is then passed on for review by the other companies, so they can point out any problems for us to fix. Though there might be differences in what is regarded as acceptable in terms of *Smash Bros* and in terms of the original series, in the end we try to find something that both sides will be happy with. What I’ve always thought throughout my time working on this series is that if what I make is of good quality, more people will support it. I can feel the expectations coming from both inside and outside the company that *Smash Bros Ultimate* will be able to do it right.

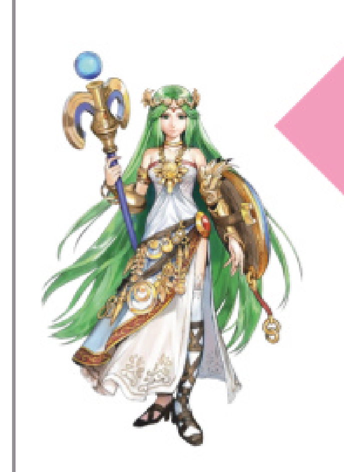
Can you explain your approach in bringing Ryu and Ken into the game? In fighting-game terms, that’s like being asked to rewrite the Bible.
I feel there’s no point overthinking it all. The system in *Smash Bros* is drastically different compared to other fighting games. However, I’d like to think that I put a lot of work into implementing these characters. I don’t think it would work if I simply mimicked or reproduced the original game. Instead, I think the key is to make it a kind of exaggeration of the characters based on their original characteristics. I’d really like people to try out Ryu’s route in the Classic Mode in *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*.

Of the new characters introduced in *Ultimate*, you’ve got a mix of more predictable choices – *Splatoon*’s Inklings, for example – and more leftfield picks, such as the Piranha Plant. What are your primary considerations when you develop a new fighter?
When selecting the fighters for this title, we referred in particular to the *Super Smash Bros* Fighter Ballot we held in the past. Since the results for this included characters whose inclusion into *Smash Bros* was impossible due to copyright-related reasons, we picked fighters from these results not necessarily in the order of the highest ranked, but instead taking into account achieving a good mix of fighters – making sure to include ones that are cute, cool, thirdparty, cartoonish and realistic. What’s important here is that the character has some kind of characteristic or fighting style that is unique to them.

Throughout your career you’ve worked with, for, and around some of the biggest legends in game development. Who has been the most important influence on you in your career, and why?
I’ve almost entirely been working solo, so it’s a bit tough to think of a particular person who has had influence on me. However, in terms of involvement, I think Mr Iwata shines in first place.

You’ve spoken in the past about how stressful your job is. And it’s clear you work hard. What drives you? How do you keep going? ▶

***Kid Icarus: Uprising*’s unorthodox stylus-led controls worked wonders for its exhilarating airborne combat, though an onscreen trackball for its ground-based sections was arguably a novelty too far**



Including six DLC characters yet to be added, *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*’s completed roster will feature a grand total of 80 fighters, more than the first three entries put together



Sakurai is evidently not one to back down from a disagreement. During development of *Kirby's Dream Land*, he was adamant that his creation should be pink. Shigeru Miyamoto preferred yellow, but Sakurai won the day

There are several things, but one of them is realising how truly impressive recent games are. I've recently played games such as *Marvel's Spider-Man* and *Red Dead Redemption 2*, and I have to take my hat off to the sheer scale and detail in these games. As someone who creates games myself, I really do understand the extraordinary amount of effort that is required to make them. It's definitely difficult to create games like that here in Japan. But of course once they are out there, users will come to expect such a standard. That's why I think that we need to work hard too. That aside, *Smash Bros* is something quite special. I don't think I could ever feel I was working too hard, as long as I am borrowing from all these game series and characters with such histories behind them.

Will you be taking a break after completing development of *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*? What are your plans? And is this, as the name implies, to be the last *Smash Bros* game you'll work on?
I expect I'll be busy working on the DLC, though it would be great if I was able to go on holiday somewhere. A great deal of possibilities lie in the future, so I'm not really in a position to say if this latest *Smash Bros* will be the last one. Although I do question whether I would be able to create one with a scale that's greater than this. Simply increasing the content doesn't necessarily mean that users would enjoy the game more. I can't really comment any further since the game hasn't been released at this point in time, and I still need to work on the DLC.

You've described your videogame collection as being like "pearls of wisdom from my predecessors". You evidently still make time to play modern games, so what can they teach someone who's been making games for 30 years? Are there any specific games that have made a particularly strong impression on you?
As I mentioned before, I do enjoy playing different kinds of games. However, since I don't have that much free time, I basically try to get through the content quickly and sometimes combine this with my exercise routine, like while riding an exercise bike. When making a *Smash Bros* game, there are sometimes cases when knowing about other games becomes an asset in unexpected ways. For example, for the Spirits in *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*, it was very important to have played the games they originated from. I've played so many games, so it's hard for me to name a specific one that's made the most impression on me. But I will say that I am always very thankful to the vast number of developers who bring such great games to life. It's remarkable that so many titles are being released now. It's thanks to the hard work of an awful lot of people that we are seeing such a fantastic lineup of games. ■

"SIMPLY INCREASING THE CONTENT DOESN'T NECESSARILY MEAN THAT USERS WOULD ENJOY THE GAME MORE"



DS puzzler *Meteos* arrived shortly after Q Entertainment's *Lumines*, to similar plaudits. It's the less elegant of the two games, though its fizzing, fast-paced action is better suited to short play sessions




INDEPEND



ENCE DAY

For one day every year, for absolutely free, legendary developer Double Fine throws the best party in town – and shows what it really means to love videogames

By Jen Simpkins

At first glance, you might not even recognise Double Fine's VP of business development wandering the halls of his own show. **Greg Rice** is going incognito. "I'm not wearing my staff shirt, because I just want to be kind of invisible!" he laughs. It's a simple black T-shirt with the Day Of The Devs logo, a wireframe skull, printed on the breast pocket. **Jon Gibson**, co-owner of production company iam8bit and the other key coordinator behind this festival, chimes in: "You can go buy that shirt, as a fan." We're tickled by the thought of Rice – a man of significant, recognisable height – trying to casually pass himself off as just a really big fan of the show. And then, after a beat during which we realise we've missed the point entirely, he reminds us. "I am."

A collaboration between revered game developer Double Fine and production company iam8bit, Day Of The Devs is a free, single-day celebration in San Francisco of some of the most exciting new games in the industry – mostly indie games, and often ones from little-known creators. It's a space in which, united by their appreciation of eccentric, artsy, lovingly made things, the lines between developers and fans are blurred. It goes both ways: not only is Day Of The Devs a chance for the people making the games to show alongside their heroes and be creatively reinvigorated by the company they're in, but also a place where players come to offer their impressions of often very early demos, and even to talk to their makers about how they might make a game of their very own. It's a melting pot of videogame and art admirers from all walks of life, and of all shapes, sizes, ages and colours – a level playing field of possibility on which the show's organisers still love to kick about ideas. "You don't know who you're talking to, and that's the best part," Gibson says. "You can have a really honest conversation with someone. We're identified by our badges, but it's fun to take off the badge and just exist in the space – to get into a conversation not because you're the boss of this, but because you're a fan as well."

"THE ORIGINAL IDEA WAS JUST HIGHLIGHTING DEVELOPERS AND FANS AND GETTING THEM TOGETHER IN A SPACE WHERE THEY DON'T HAVE TO PAY"

This year marks the sixth annual Day Of The Devs, and it's come a long way from its very first outing, which was primarily about promoting Double Fine's newest game at the time, *Broken Age*. "We wanted to invite all our Kickstarter backers to come see it, so we knew we would need a big party to do that," Rice says, "and a big venue to hold it all, and to be able to house other games and other friends." But Double Fine wanted to do things its way: fun, friendly, stress-free. "We had been to a lot of shows, PAX and events like that," he says. "And we love the environment that they provide as far as getting to meet your fans face to face – but we know how hard these events can be to throw. We wanted to do one where we take a lot of the work on for the developers, so they can just slide in really easily and experience it, and not have to deal with all those headaches." Iam8bit was the obvious choice of collaborator, as Double Fine had worked with the company before, and needed a partner with expert knowledge of running an event. "The original idea was just highlighting developers and fans and getting them together in a space where they don't have to pay, everything is free, it's all open – and it's all just a celebration of games as artform."

There would be 11 games in total, including Double Fine's games as well as those of studios such as Capy Games and Honeyslug. There would be surprises from special guests Funomena. Phil Fish would DJ. Hopefully, somebody would turn up. "The food trucks didn't trust us when we said we were doing an indie-games event," Gibson says. "When you say 'indie-games event', you don't think there's going to be thousands of people wanting to eat lunch out of your truck. You think five nerds sitting on bean bags." Much to the relief of everybody involved, about 1,000 people showed up, as hungry for tacos as they were for games. And it all worked wonderfully. Double Fine's relationship and communication with fans changed drastically. "Part of that experience was that we were much more in touch with the community, and much more hands on with letting them see stuff early," Double Fine founder **Tim Schafer** says. "It kind of increased bandwidth with the community, which is the era that Day Of The Devs has grown out of."

And grown it has. This year, we find ourselves in San Francisco's up-and-coming Dogpatch neighbourhood at a music venue called The Midway in anticipation of the 70-plus games ▶

1 General entry for the show is free, but the optional VIP ticket (about £10) offers early entry, as well as a Humble Bundle of games including *Full Throttle* and *Hyper Light Drifter*, and a discount coupon for iam8bit's store **2** Greg Rice, VP of business development at Double Fine and Day Of The Devs curator **3** Jon Gibson, co-founder and owner of iam8bit **4** Tim Schafer, founder of Double Fine **5** "We get more and more kids every year," says Gibson, "and they're excited to play weird little indie games. Normally, where would you find that stuff if you're a kid? It's so hard to comb through Steam these days, and find anything that's not bannered and plastered somewhere"

CROWD PLEASER

Just a single image of *The Wild At Heart* caught Greg Rice's eye: its creators were invited to show a demo at Day Of The Devs. "It's a really nice crowd for where we're at," programmer Chris Sumsky says. "Everyone is here because they love games – they're not in it to get something out of it for themselves, which is what so many conferences are about. There's nothing wrong with that, obviously: networking is a huge part of being in this industry. But that's not what this is. If you go to an arts festival in your local park, you don't go there to schmooze, right? You go there because you love art."




1
Double Fine & iam8bit present
DAY OF THE DEVS
STEP
RIGHT UP


2


3


4


5





1
2
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TOTAL
00/00

1 DICEY DUNGEONS
Terry Cavanagh's new Roguelike is as compulsive as it is charming: you roll dice, which you can then slot into your equipment to power it up and give yourself a fighting chance against enemies while hunting for treasure. And in case you weren't already on board, *Super Hexagon* composer Chipzel returns to provide the tunes.

1 KIDS
A bizarre touchscreen game about the wisdom – or madness – of crowds, *Kids* sees you tapping, pulling and swiping on blank-faced people to affect action en masse. Childlike voices lend welcome playfulness to some deeply weird experiences: massaging a conga line of bodies through an intestine, for example.

3 GENESIS NOIR
We knew that this interstellar detective title looked lovely: surprisingly, it's even more sumptuous to play, all sweeping camera angles and shapeshifting cosmos. In an effort to link the fate of a deer with an exploding star, we follow the footprints of its hunters with our magnifying glass. Heart-wrenching stuff, even for a short demo.

4 THE WILD AT HEART
Easily one of the most gorgeous games at the show. Think *Pikmin* by way of a children's storybook: your diminutive friends' unique abilities help you battle your way through the dangers of an otherworldly Grove, while the resources you gather will help you rejuvenate your forest home.

that will be shown. We've arrived just a few hours after the developers, who've spent a fairly relaxed morning putting up pre-made signs over their assigned TVs, running final tests on builds and trying out each other's creations before the doors open. The event organisers, meanwhile, have been here since the early hours. While the process is a little easier than it used to be – Gibson recalls their second show in San Francisco's Old Mint, which was "under renovations, so you didn't really know what was going to work, and what wasn't. You would plug stuff in and you'd have to run cables through broken windows" – things are still somewhat "scrappy", he says, in the interest of making everything as stress-free as possible for fans and developers alike.

Double Fine's preloading and testing of all the game builds is done for developers a week ahead of time at its offices – not counting a few cheeky last-minute emails from devs the evening before the show, whose builds usually also end up being accommodated. "It's the work that, normally, if we were running our own booth at PAX we would do it all ourselves," Rice says. Here, he's happy to take it on for others. The setup for the show is done in the morning, the teardown at night – all in a single day. "At other conventions, you're setting up for three to four days sometimes, and then you're tearing down for one or two days," Gibson says. "You're in a convention hall for a week or more sometimes." Rice adds: "It's just so exhausting, and you can't really tell how much added benefit you're getting out of the extra time. So I think we liked the idea of this all feeling like a moment, and a party – it's here, and then it's gone."

Indeed, walking into Day Of The Devs feels more like walking into an underground rock show than a convention. We're handed a badge that looks less like an official lanyard and more like a backstage pass. Indie game luminaries mill about with beers in hand; first-time developers look on with an equal mix of nerves and elation as industry heroes alight curiously upon their games. Things are laid out in the interest of equal opportunity: there are no gargantuan booths booming over the rest of the fray, with identical TVs lined up next to each other instead. Apart from an ever-so-slightly longer queue, *Kingdom Hearts III* has the exact same setup as *The Haunted Island: A Frog Detective Game*. And while Day Of The Devs is a chance for Double Fine to show off some of the latest games it has signed to its publishing label, Double Fine Presents, *Samurai Gunn 2*, *Knights And Bikes* and *Ooblets* don't receive any preferential treatment.

"Even though they're Double Fine Presents, there's no publisher logos on anything on the floor," Gibson says. 'It's all just developers. They might be in the game itself, but signage, everything is all about the developers. It was a deliberate decision. Not, 'Oh, Square Enix is publishing this, and PlayStation is publishing that.'"

It's purposefully subversive.

Instead, games in various areas of the building are laid out almost thematically, which provides a sense of structure and flow to spaces. The initial corridor we walk into, a long narrow hall leading down towards the outdoor music and food truck area, feels almost like a gallery. A Grim Fandango art installation adorns one wall, faced on the other side by iam8bit's merchandise stands filled with videogame vinyl. A little further down, there are the games – titles such as *Genesis Noir* and *Small Talk*, or *In Other Waters* and *PiAwk*, which look almost like moving portraiture on the

APART FROM AN EVER-SO-SLIGHTLY LONGER QUEUE, KINGDOM HEARTS III HAS THE EXACT SAME SETUP AS THE HAUNTED ISLAND: A FROG DETECTIVE GAME

rows of screens. A darker room on the left is more multiplayer-focused and kid-friendly, Robin Baumgarten's interactive LED installation games bathing faces in neon light, two visitors racing in hoverbike-centric RPG *Desert Child*. On the right is a room (we walk to it through a small corridor, past three nature-themed games) purposefully filled with more press-focused fare. "They're games that haven't been highlighted as much, and I thought might be a little bit more newsworthy," Rice says. "And I figured you don't want to yell over music." The place for that would be the main room, in which a main stage hosts speakers throughout the day, showcases footage from every single game at the show on a huge projector screen, and in which the bar is located. We notice games here that have generated a bit of buzz already – *Kingdom Hearts III* is in this room, as well as silly *John Wick*-esque shooter *My Friend Pedro*, mysterious puzzle-platformer *Vane*, and Night School Studio's hellish drinking adventure *Afterparty*. ▶



The main room is the busiest area, containing some of the more high-profile games, the bar and the stage. The show sees an average of 20,000 visitors in a single day


FLOTSAM

But there's plenty at this year's Day Of The Devs that we've never played before, or, indeed, heard of at all. It's to be expected – **Edge**'s indie coverage for the year, in truth, owes much to the annual Day Of the Devs sizzle reel, a reliable yearly source of fantastic-looking new games. It's Rice who is the curational mastermind behind this, even if he's remarkably modest about his eye for talent and originality. "I think the first year of Day Of The Devs was just all my friends!" he laughs. "I mean, I think it starts with that. I'm looking all year for games, so I'm going to lots of festivals and trying to meet people, and see what games stand out." The show's open submissions policy helps, too: this year saw 350 submissions from developers from all over the world. "We do comb through all those and find interesting things that might be from outside of our social spheres that we haven't heard of. We're always trying to find games that are from diverse backgrounds, and bring new voices into the mix. But a lot of it is keeping an eye on the industry, who's making games we're excited about, and following up

"A LOT OF IT IS KEEPING AN EYE ON THE INDUSTRY, WHO'S MAKING GAMES WE'RE EXCITED ABOUT, AND SEEING WHAT THEY'RE DOING NEXT"

with them and seeing what they're doing next."

It's clear that Rice – and indeed, everyone helping run Day Of The Devs – is passionate about bright new indie developers and off-the-wall ideas. Rice's job may be to hunt down promising new projects for Double Fine Presents, and there's certainly ample opportunity to do that at this show. But it's clear that Day Of The Devs is about more than business. "I've just been interested in the indie scene as long as it's existed," Rice says. "From the early days of the *Cave Story*s and the *Braid*s and the *Flow*s, I've just always been excited about this space of people making new types of games, and seeing that pop up outside of triple-A. I just really like games, so if somebody makes a cool one I usually try to seek them out, and see what their next games are like. And usually if they make one hit they're going to make another one." Gibson laughs: "Greg is actually one of the most frustrating human beings on this planet because I always look at it as a challenge to try to send him a suggestion for a game to see if he hasn't seen it yet. He's always ahead of it. It's like he has a secret sense for that stuff."

Schafer, too, recognises the significance of Rice's curation skills. "As far as the heart of the show, really, a lot of it is the games that Greg chooses. He looks at every single game and plays so many games, too. He's got a good sense for it. And some of them that we pick we don't even have all the information for. Sometimes he just saw a cool demo or not even that, just a cool animated thing. Sometimes he just takes a chance. And I think it's also that he tries to balance the show: having *Rosa's Garden*, and *Bee Simulator* next to it, creating these little areas." It's this air of the hand-crafted and hand-selected that lends such a personal feeling to the show. Developers clearly feel comfortable showing whatever they have so far here, from very basic two-or-three-screen playable concept demos all the way up to finished games. "Devs feel like they get feedback that's really honest and raw from people who really love games, and aren't here to be critical or knock something because it's not polished enough," Gibson says. "Whereas at PAX or E3, you can't show things that might be unfinished, here it's a safe environment to do that. If someone crashes here, no one's going to take a picture of it and post it on Reddit and say, 'This game is broken'." Rice agrees: "Our fans are very welcoming and open, and they're always interested in strange things, and I think they've come to expect that from this event – that there's going to be interesting, artistic games unlike anything they've seen before."

The event being local contributes to the atmosphere – San Francisco, after all, is a hub for people with exactly the kind of do-it-yourself attitude present in the games in Day Of The Devs' lineup. And no one can resist a freebie. Day Of The Devs was a sponsored event from its very inception – some are bigger such as Sony, Microsoft and Intel, others are fellow indies, and some are even secret benefactors who want to support what Double Fine and iam8bit are doing without splashing their logos all over everything. "The trick to it is that it's not intended to be a money-making thing, and it's also not a very expensive thing," Schafer says. "We get great sponsorships from Astro and Red Bull, all these companies so that it's not expensive for us or the other developers." The event had to be funded, because it had to be free. "I just feel like sometimes you go to other shows and you feel the for-profit-ness of it. The decisions are made based on how to maximise the profits for that event, and you feel that in the experience. And so hopefully people here have a different ▶

1 Art is also on display around the show: this year saw a 20th anniversary Grim Fandango display featuring original designs. Another highlight was Gabriel Barcia-Colombo's video sculpture piece, a collection of glass bottles with moving portraiture projected inside. **2** Musicians who have scored the games on show play live. 2018's lineup: *Samurai Gunn 2* composer Doseone, *Tetris Effect*'s Hydelic, and Chipzel (pictured), who had an audience member smash a misbehaving Game Boy at the end of her set

SPIRIT OF HOSPITALITY

Day Of The Devs is a homecoming for *Oxenfree* developer Night School Studio: it's back this year with *Afterparty*. "The show is well curated, the vibe fits our general vibe – there's a bar right next to the game demo!" co-founder Sean Krankel laughs. "There are DJs. It feels the most in line with the vision of our studio. The other thing is that Double Fine makes it all so easy. They're developers, so they understand." For co-founder Adam Hines, showing next to games of such consistent originality and quality is heartening: "Double Fine's games have such a specific feeling: they try to do one new thing every game. Most of the games here are like that."

FREE AND EASY

Australian dev Grace Bruxner's game, *The Haunted Island: A Frog Detective Game*, was selected after she applied through the show's open submissions process. She's demoing the full game, which is weeks from release. "Exhibiting at places like PAX is really expensive unless you have a grant or a publisher," she says. "This is free to exhibit, and they provide it all for you, so there's no hassle. All I had to do was put my sign up." She sees Day Of The Devs' general reputation and popularity as "probably due to Double Fine, and Greg Rice working very, very hard to make it happen."


1
GRIM FANDANGO
20TH ANNIVERSARY ART SHOW
GRIM FANDANGO
DAY OF THE DEVS
DAY OF THE DEVS
2
Pioneer DJ


1
78932 UNIT
MONEY
EXCHANGE
CREEPY
MONEY
2
PABLO'S
DAVES
ラーメン
RACING
3
OBJECT
4

1 SCRAPPERS
PixelJunk developer Q-Games is back to remind us that, yes, there's something enormously satisfying about the art of tidying up. In this cooperative brawler, you compete to collect and stack the most valuable salvage you can find before offering it up to the moveable maw of a rubbish truck for maximum points.

2 DESERT CHILD
A hoverbike RPG inspired by Japanese animated films Akira and Redline, you must win shmup races against NPCs challengers (or other players in two-player mode) to improve your ride's weapons and style, eat ramen, deliver drugs, win the Championship and get the hell off a doomed Earth.

3 IN OTHER WATERS
Every screenshot of this fluorescent, abstract deep sea adventure could be a hung in a frame. You play as the AI in a xenobiologist's high-tech diving suit, twiddling buttons and collecting samples to help your wearer study the ocean floor. Peaceful – until some highly unexpected lifeforms turn up.

4 BIRD ALONE
Be therapised by your avian friend in this, the next game from the developer of *Far From Noise*. With interactive backgrounds inspired by *Electroplankton*, some very funny writing, and even a painting section, this promises to be a wonderful antidote to daily stresses – it's designed to be played in short bursts on mobile.

experience." Above all, Rice says, "We just wanted to encourage anyone who's interested to be able to get here and not have to have that be a barrier to entry, both on the developer side and the fan side." Even if San Francisco might be an expensive city to travel to and stay in, a free-to-attend, free-to-exhibit one-day show could at least alleviate some of the cost.

And for the locals, it's a wonderful homegrown reminder of their hometown's avant-garde, self-starter values. The crowd at the show is a revelation: at least half of the visitors are women, there are lots of young children with their parents, and a surprising number of elderly attendees. Seeing as though Day Of The Devs isn't about money, bringing such a wide variety of people through the doors is one way for Double Fine and iam8bit to measure the success of the show. "It's local San Francisco families who come here, and see games, and see that games have such a variety of what they're trying to do – visually and emotionally," Schafer says. "All these people don't realise there's a rose garden tending game out there, and one where you can be a deer, you know? I feel like it's like a little oasis, an oasis of the positive side of humanity. The creative spirit is on show here, in the middle of a world that seems like it's run by mean, stupid people." He laughs. "It's nice to be around the opposite of that."

Day Of The Devs has developed over its six-year lifespan – its lineup of musicians growing steadily bigger and more high-profile, its backstage green rooms host to developer appointments with scouts from PlayStation, Xbox, Nintendo and more. So, too, have its goals: now more than ever, Day Of The Devs' role as a place that helps uncover and proudly display some of the greatest potential in the game industry feels crucial, in an age where digital storefronts are cluttered with releases. "But sometimes to me it's about how it *hasn't* changed, and has really kept true to its original spirit," Schafer says. "Because we've talked about this – like, 'What do we want to do with this?' Because you could see that path of, okay, we blow this thing up – we can do three days, we can charge 25 dollars a ticket and do all these things." Were they ever tempted? "As soon as we had that conversation about the different paths we could go with this, that just never seemed like an option – there are already shows like that."

This is about creating a completely different kind of event – and one that many other conventions could learn a lot from, it seems. "I think it's just about trying to support the industry, and the indie side of the industry, and people trying to do interesting new things," Rice says. "Like, we're all huge fans of videogames, and we want to see them grow, we want to see new experiences. We feel that these games are representing that, so we want to put a spotlight on them and just do everything we can to make sure they're being seen." It makes sense that Double Fine would be the publisher to do it, a developer with a track record of creating brilliant, fiercely individual games, with one of its feet in triple-A and the other in the indie scene. "It's also good karma, to be doing a show like this, you know," Gibson says. "What goes around comes around. Double Fine was not always as big as a developer as they are now. They were indie developers – they still *are* indie developers – but there are different tiers. Some developers can't even afford office space, let alone PCs to develop on. So it's nice to give back, in some minor way."

Whether it's developers, attendees or the organisers that we talk to, the universal consensus is that Day Of The Devs exists mostly as much-needed encouragement, a positive affirmation that's there's always a space for something (or

AT LEAST HALF OF THE VISITORS ARE WOMEN, THERE ARE LOTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN WITH THEIR PARENTS, AND A NUMBER OF ELDERLY ATTENDEES

someone) completely different, a place in which people stand shoulder to shoulder with their peers and are equally intimidated and inspired by what's right next to them. "You know, I've been doing this for 30 years," Schafer says. "And some years you're really excited to do it, and some years you're like, 'Why do I even make videogame things?' Something toxic's going on, something where you just think, 'Ah, videogames'.

"And then the Day Of The Devs trailer comes out, and I'm like, 'Fuck yeah, videogames! Yes!' Videogames are such a great place where people do some of the most creative, artistic work. I find that video super-inspiring every year when that comes out. If you're going to do this for 30 years, you have to keep a check on your inspiration, and always be in touch with like, 'Why do I do this?' And Day Of The Devs is one of those collections of things to keep in touch with. It's important to my mental health, you know? To my inspiration, and my sense that the game industry is a good place to be." ■

THE MAKING OF...



HIDDEN FOLKS

How two creatives collaborated to build an interactive game of hide-and-seek – and what they found

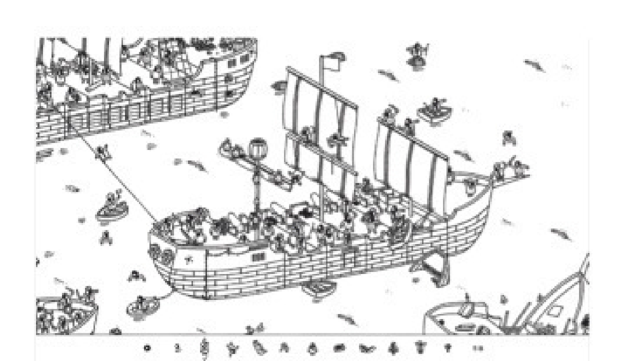
By Jen Simpkins

Format Android, iOS, PC, Switch
Developer/publisher Adriaan de Jongh, Sylvain Tegroeg
Origin The Netherlands
Release 2017

Curiosity might kill the cat, but it can do wonders for videogames. *Hidden Folks* is a game about poking things to see what happens. As in the Where's Wally books, you search a detailed world for a specific character or object – here, the process is elevated by interactions, as you open doors, pull up blinds and cut away bushes simply to see what may be hiding behind them. It's hardly surprising, then, that *Hidden Folks* is a product of its creators' own curiosities. Game designer **Adriaan de Jongh** makes a habit of visiting the Gerrit Rietveld Academie's graduation expo each year because "they're famous for teaching art from a more conceptual level, so it's just wild. Most of the time I'm incapable of understanding it, so I enjoy it a lot." During a visit in 2014, one particular exhibit caught his eye: a row of glass globes with sculptures inside, and behind them, black-and-white line art showing lively scenes of industry. It was the work of illustrator **Sylvain Tegroeg**. "I'll always remember seeing Adriaan's head passing by, and then coming back," Tegroeg says. "And then we started to talk."

De Jongh was fascinated. "They were these amazing little worlds. The first thing that I did when I saw them was push my head into them and really look at all these little details, all these little things that were happening," he says. "I sort of jokingly told Sylvain, 'We should make a game together'". The joke very quickly turned into a prototype, a two-hour thing hacked together from illustrations that de Jongh had downloaded from Tegroeg's website. "The very first thing that came to mind when thinking about his artwork in a game way was that I wanted people to really experience his little worlds," de Jongh says. "It was a very small step to go from, 'How do we make people look at your stuff closely?', to, 'We should make a searching game so that people *have* to look at it.'" De Jongh emailed Tegroeg when the prototype was finished – "Obviously I didn't tell him that I stole all his art from his website!" – and the two met. Long-time videogame player Tegroeg was immediately on board. "I was super happy, because at that period of time, animation was the next step for my illustrations," he says. "I always felt this attraction of making it feel alive."

Thus, *Hidden Folks* began to take shape. The two attended conferences, gamedev events and Unity gatherings for about a year, figuring out how to hone their concept for a game into something with wide appeal. It was also during this time that the groundwork was laid for how the two would operate as a team. Game Oven, the studio de Jongh had helped found, had recently closed. The experience had left him with a determination to work as a collaborator, rather than as part of a studio. On *Hidden Folks*, de Jongh and Tegroeg would remain collaborators: no founding a company, no pay (at least initially), and equal ownership of the new IP. "I had seen what happens when you hire people who then don't actually own something," de Jongh says. "One of the reasons that we closed Game Oven was I had stumbled upon people who gave it 100 per cent, but what I realised I needed was their 110 per cent. There are a lot of people in the world who say they want to make something good, but to actually own it and *fight* for it – that's the next level."



New additions, such as the recent beach update, are about offering more visual variety than anything mechanically different. Consistency is key to keeping the game accessible

"I HAD STUMBLED UPON PEOPLE WHO GAVE 100 PER CENT, BUT WHAT I NEEDED WAS 110 PER CENT"

Hidden Folks was to be defined by Tegroeg's own monochrome, minimalist yet intricate art style; the first order of business, then, was to figure out how to add the drawings in the game and preserve their quality. Tegroeg would start to riff on paper, filling sheets with characters, objects and scenery which could be scanned into the computer. "The first drawings I did were on really crappy paper," Tegroeg says. The printer paper would soak up the half-millimitere fineliner pen's ink, or leave blank white dots in drawings; he soon moved onto using Bristol paper. "The actual scanning was a thing that we needed to figure out," de Jongh says. "Sylvain mostly did, but halfway through making the game, the scanner broke. It was one of those shitty scanners you buy for like, 30 bucks. So he bought a new one that was a lot better, but the image quality was very different! So he got rid of the good scanner to buy the exact same shitty scanner again! Which I laughed so hard at."

Normally, Tegroeg would simply draw illustrations as a connected whole. However, *Hidden Folks*' animated and interactive elements required a deconstructed approach, with the artist learning to split characters and scenery into individual sprites, filling pages with buttons and switches, or the arms, legs and heads needed for the character generator. And then there was the question of optimisation. With each level – or 'area' – made up of hundreds of different images, de Jongh had to ensure that loading the game wouldn't crash smartphones. That was where sprite sheets came in; each area required about four sides of A4 filled with stuff, so loading an area meant a device only had to load those four images. "It's not super technically hard what we did, because from the start we thought about making these optimised images, making the game from these building blocks," de Jongh says. "In terms of graphics, not everything can be unique, but in terms of placement, we do have to make it unique for it to look like a distinct area."

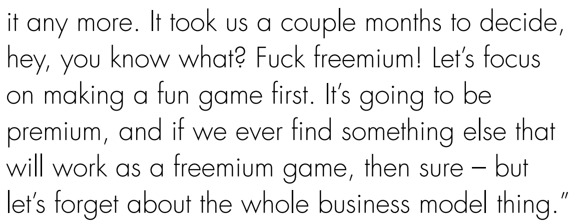
City, forest, snowscape, factory: whatever the setting, Tegroeg would begin by determining the size of an area, placing four objects in each corner and filling the space with larger illustrations before zooming in to add tiny details. Layering was the next crucial puzzle to solve, with everything in *Hidden Folks*' quasi-isometric worlds needing to sit on its own plane, so that players could move elements and discover what was behind certain objects. "I tried a couple of things, and it was just too hard," de Jongh says. "So I decided to just go for the simplest thing we could do, which is manually layer everything." It took a week or so for him to spin up a tool that would allow Tegroeg, who was unfamiliar with Unity, to move his illustrations onto the correct ▶

plane. "In hindsight, it might have not been the greatest idea," de Jongh laughs. "But any other alternative may have been as much work."

Fortunately, the art side came naturally to Tegroeg, who was comfortable with the style he'd spent years honing. "It's never easy," he says. "There are always things to discover, even in that style." But there was no doubt that Tegroeg's talent was a driving force behind development. He could draw every object in perfect perspective, no grid paper needed. "This is literally Sylvain's brain fucking going haywire," de Jongh says, his eyes lighting up. "It's incredible. Sometimes if he needs to draw straight lines, he'll draw guidelines in pencil. But he doesn't really require it. If I tell him to draw a car, he will just – poof – do the car, in that perspective. It's fucking mind-blowing." Most of the ideas for area (and sub-area) themes came from Tegroeg, who would draw whatever popped into his head for various environments, inspired by "a mix of things – my own experience with family travelling, or with other games, and also visual culture." De Jongh's role was to provide more game design-focused feedback: "I'd say, 'I love this little sub-area here – can you make it like, ten times bigger? So that we can actually have a clue pointing at it. Once we'd go into discussing the area, and placing the targets, then we'd try to shape the area around those targets."

Meaningful interactions were the focus: almost everything that players touched should help them find what they were searching for, whether it was poking repeatedly at crops to have them 'grow' to reveal an item – or sliding up on tent flaps to roll them up. "That's kind of a cheat," Tegroeg laughs. "In real life, you wouldn't do that! But it worked out, interaction-wise. With lots of things, we had playfulness between reality and the interaction." Not everything had to be about objectives, with some things added for the sake of pure fun. But anything that threatened the game's relaxed vibe had to go, including timed areas involving finding a certain number of targets. "We cut four or five of those because we realised it was just not going to work," de Jongh says. The first area that came together enough to be deemed 'finished' was the camping area, about a year and three months of trying to figure out what 'finished' meant. "It's a lot about the mix between static and interactive, and it's also a lot about how you guide people into it," de Jongh says: playtesting was extensive.





Q&A

Sylvain Tegroeg
Illustrator

Colour is a common tool in game design. Were you ever tempted to add it?
That's something we discussed at the beginning of making the game. My art style was black and white. I wasn t comfortable with adding colour. I like to work with colours, but I find it really difficult – I don't have as much experience with it as drawing in black and white, so I'm a bit reticent about it. If we had added colour, it would have maybe felt too much like Where's Waldo – even though it's now a really obvious reference! I think if there was colour, there would be a huge change in the art style but also in the how the game would play.

What did you learn from the process of making *Hidden Folks*?
How to make a game. I had all this gaming experience, thinking, what's the trick? And now when I'm playing games, I see the strings behind it. And working with a game designer like Adriaan – as a product designer, that's something I was always eager to do. As a freelance designer, you work with a client, and you don't have this partnership. I learned a lot about making compromises: things that you would love to be in the game, but actually they can't, because there's a way a game has to be.

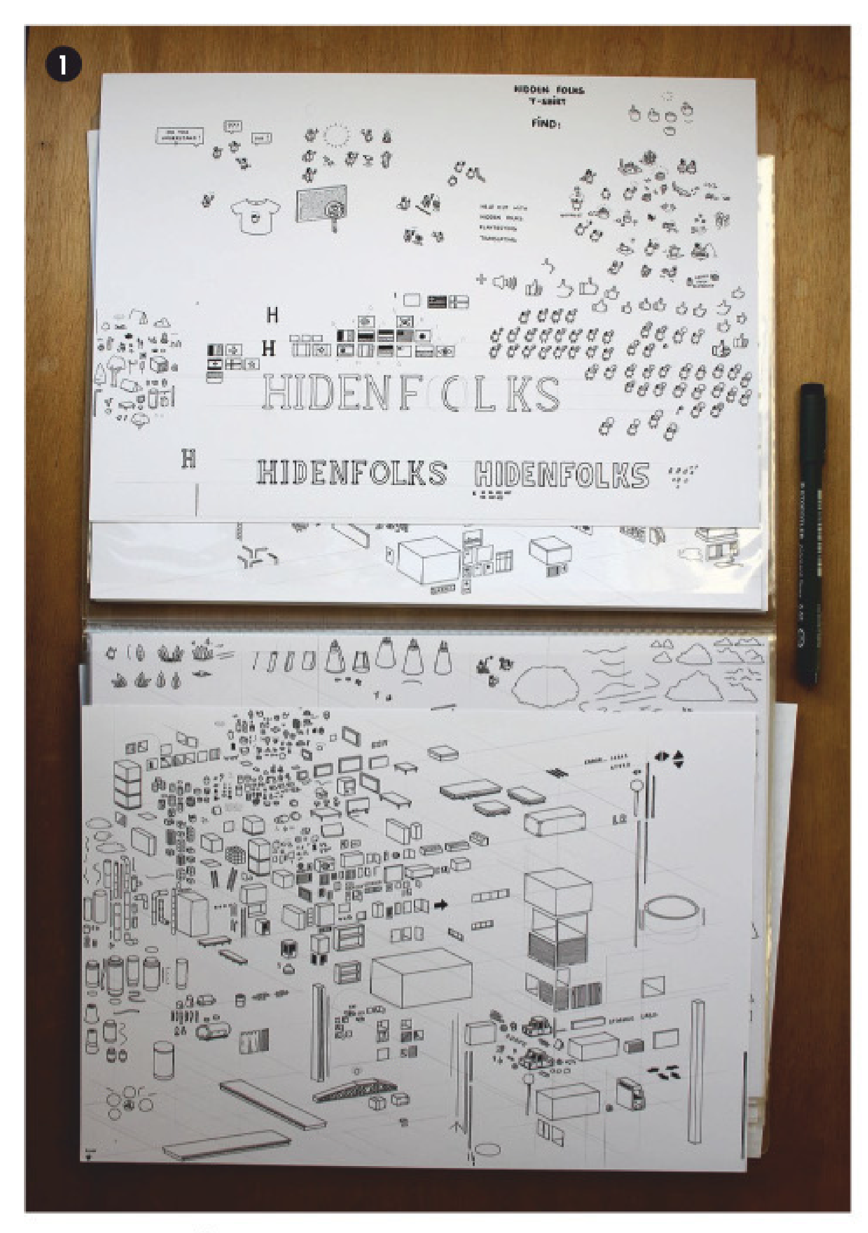
Hidden-object games are very popular as a genre. Why do you think that is?
Sometimes I'm wondering if it's not just voyeurism. Sometimes people interact with things just to be like, 'Oh, what's inside that closet or that drawer?' They just want to have a look. They are just curious. There are so many little stories and little things happening, and your head is just like, what's happening? You just want to know!

But conserving *Hidden Folks*' light and airy feel sometimes took an extraordinary toll. Soon, a business model needed to be decided upon. "I had made premium games up until then," de Jongh says. "Even though they were critically acclaimed, we barely made the money to be able to run a studio. With that in the back of my mind, I was like, 'Maybe we should think about making *Hidden Folks* free to play." He was determined to try, but found money-motivated aspects creeping into many aspects of the design. "It was a very depressing time. It got to a point where I just didn't want to think about the project, and where we both weren't motivated to work on it any more. It took us a couple months to decide, hey, you know what? Fuck freemium! Let's focus on making a fun game first. It's going to be premium, and if we ever find something else that will work as a freemium game, then sure – but let's forget about the whole business model thing."

For de Jongh and Tegroeg, *Hidden Folks* was a personal project – business came second. But success followed: *Hidden Folks* was a triumph born of earnest artistry and collaboration. And therein lay the difficulty. "Sylvain put his heart and soul into this game," de Jongh says, "and that's obviously what I signed up for, and also what he signed up for. But what you also must understand is that if Sylvain draws anything right now, there will be some people who see nothing but *Hidden Folks* in that." Tegroeg's art became accidentally synonymous with the shared IP. "There were some tough conversations between us about what is part of *Hidden Folks* and what isn't," de Jongh says: we can hear the emotion in his voice. "That was very, very hard. This is why people will make companies, and hire people, and not be collaborators – this is one of those things."

Tegroeg adds: "It was like we were giving away the whole art style for the game. At the beginning, it was hard to accept that. We had a lot of discussions about how we could approach that on a professional level." De Jongh describes Tegroeg's art style as "his handwriting, basically – I can't disallow it. And that's where a lot of the tough feelings for him came from: 'Adriaan is actively disallowing me to use my own creations anywhere'. Whereas for me it was like, 'What the hell, man, you're making good money because of my marketing and all the effort we put in together'. So that was a very tough situation for us to get out of. This stuff is complicated to talk about, because it's so nuanced, and it was close to the heart." But a compromise was reached: Tegroeg's art style remains his alone, and as long as he doesn't use it in any other searching games, both parties are happy.

A final, extraordinary show of sportsmanship and solidarity, then, in the face of a complex issue. Now, with a total of six team members, a Switch release and the recent beach update, *Hidden Folks* may still be growing, but at its core it will always be two curious collaborators – de Jongh, who spotted a row of strange glass globes and thought to turn back, and Tegroeg, who saw the chance to develop his art and make his first game – and what they found in each other. ■





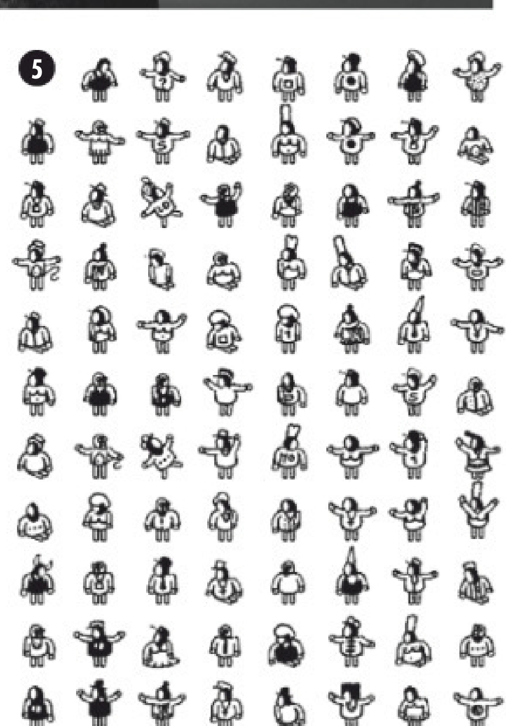


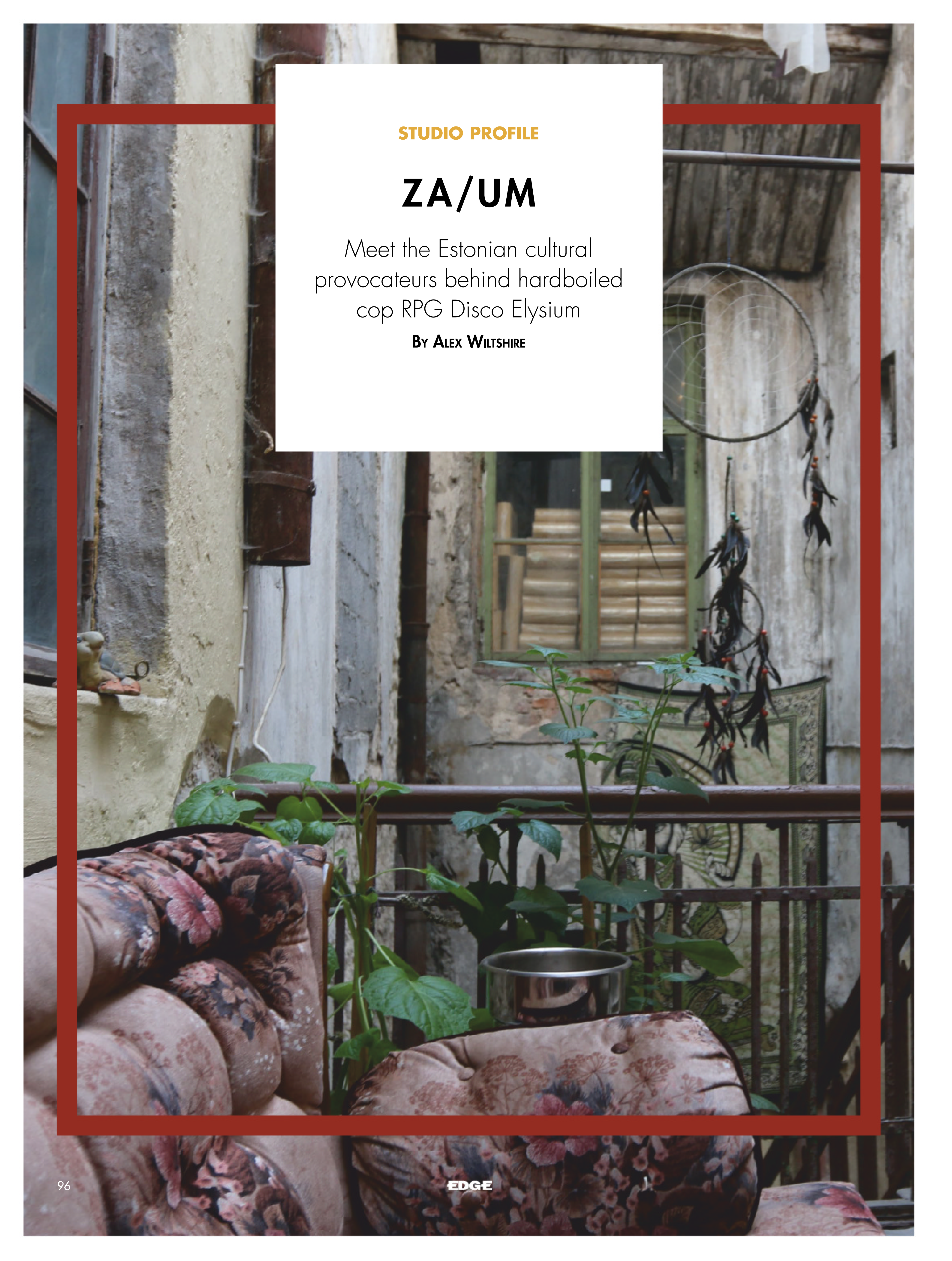






❶ Moving clouds and lifting blinds is key to finding targets in the city area. De Jongh: "The blinds have a very specific pattern, so you know if there's a thing like that, you can drag it open." ❷ Early sprite sheets from the beach area, which was the latest update to the game. ❸ One of Tegroeg's 'Idea Globes' from his graduation project. The background art was far denser and busier than that of *Hidden Folks*. ❹ Tegroeg takes 20 to 24 hours to fill a side of A4 with sprites. "It feels quite fast, if it's full of details. I've done bigger sizes, A3, in 36 hours." ❺ Game sounds were made entirely by mouth. "We'd go to Adriaan's place, and scream into the mic for the whole afternoon," Tegroeg laughs, "and hope the neighbours wouldn't complain"





STUDIO PROFILE

ZA/UM

Meet the Estonian cultural provocateurs behind hardboiled cop RPG Disco Elysium

By Alex Wiltshire



Founded 2005
Employees 35
Key staff Robert Kurvitz (founder), Kaur Kender (writer), Aleksander Rostov (art director)
URL zaumstudio.com
Current projects *Disco Elysium*

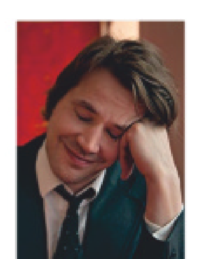
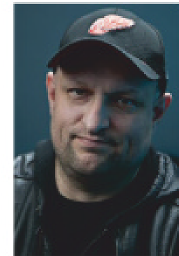
ZA/UM. As a studio name, it's awfully bold and affected. A little awkward and intractable, too; it doesn't look right when not in all-caps. But for co-founder **Robert Kurvitz**, "It just looks hella cool, that slash there. It looks like the technical name of something that definitely exists and weighs eight tonnes." And then there's its Russian meaning, which is 'from the mind' or 'for the mind'. "Just calling something that, it looks cultural. Like it's not laughable."

Then again, it did come out of a drunken Tallinn evening in 2005. "We were just hanging around in total squalor and poverty," says Kurvitz, who was the singer in a rock band called Ultramelanhool at the time. "We realised we needed to do something about it, and we put on DJ Tiesto's remix of Adagio For Strings, because it's a really epic and stupid banger." The idea of making a videogame wasn't remotely on their minds; they simply wanted to open a creative outlet and make their voices heard, and so formed a collective of artists and writers who, over the following decade or so, created music, paintings and books, got into scraps with other collectives, and played Dungeons & Dragons.

"I think I met Robert when I was 17 or something," art director **Aleksander Rostov** says. "Before that, you'd hear these whispers going around about some crazy dudes who were doing this weird obsessive D&D thing that wasn't about dwarves and elves but motor carriages and people wearing top hats. It was like steampunk, but not vanilla steampunk, it was inspired by the French Revolution. When I got the materials, the photos of the characters and the maps, in person, it was like, 'Oh, shit, this is the stuff'."

Kurvitz, meanwhile, had met a novelist called Kaur Kender. "Once we got Kaur on board, everything really started flowing because Kaur has this superpower that's very important in capitalism. He understands money," says Kurvitz. "He's also a really good writer, and those seldom happen together." Kender helped Kurvitz self-publish a 2013 novel set in the world he'd been building called Sacred And Terrible Air. It took him five years to write and featured art by Rostov, but it failed miserably. "It sold 1,000 copies," says Kurvitz. "So after that I succumbed to deep alcoholism."

Three years earlier, Kurvitz had helped Kender out of his own alcoholism, and, anxious to help his friend in turn, Kender went to Kurvitz with a proposal. "My kids were telling me, 'Stop writing books! No one reads books! You should get into videogames,'" says Kender, so he suggested, why didn't they make a game set in this world Kurvitz had been creating?


FROM LEFT **ZA/UM was founded by Robert Kurvitz in 2005 as an art collective, attracting novelist Kaur Kender and painter Aleksander Rostov before eventually starting to make a game**

"I had never dreamt of making a videogame before, because I couldn't get one piece of it into something that small and concentrated," says Kurvitz. "But then I suddenly saw the ghetto part of Revachol from up on high, and I realised that it would be perfect for an isometric game." Kurvitz told Kender he needed to discuss the idea with Rostov. "I remember going to the door to let him in," Rostov says. "He looked me dead in the eye and said, 'My friend, we failed at so many things. Let us also fail at making a videogame.'"

"MY KIDS WERE TELLING ME, 'STOP WRITING BOOKS! NO ONE READS BOOKS! YOU SHOULD GET INTO VIDEOGAMES'"

"I wasn't going to do a videogame," says Kurvitz. "I was thinking that we'd failed in enough things and I was just going to keep drinking." But Rostov jumped at the idea, so Kurvitz wrote a one-page synopsis which encapsulates what *Disco Elysium* has become in the four years since: "AD&D meets '70s cop-show, in an original 'fantastic realist' setting, with swords, guns and motor-cars. Realised as an isometric CRPG – a modern advancement on the legendary *Planescape: Torment* and *Baldur's Gate*. Massive, reactive story. Exploring a vast, poverty-stricken ghetto. Deep, strategic combat."

"So clear was the vision that I had zero doubts," Kender says. Still, it was a huge deal for ZA/UM to make a videogame. "The idea that you can make a videogame in Tallinn is completely ridiculous," Rostov says. "We have to rub the idea of it into each other's dreams or something, to convince ourselves that it's something that can be done."

"And especially a roleplaying game, because the RPG is like the crown jewel, the most complicated thing to make," Kurvitz says. "Everyone says you can't QA it. An open-world RPG, are you insane? It just felt like it's completely beyond any of our abilities, beyond anything we could do financially, even intellectually." Tallinn, after all, had just one other studio at the time, a mobile developer, so there was very little experienced local talent. But they did have access to some money: Kender sold his Ferrari. "It was a very sad and pathetic Ferrari," he says.

"The cheapest," Kurvitz says. "It used to belong to Dolph Lundgren."

"He bought it because he was imagining how he'd drive it to Cannes, but they never gave him a prize, so he sold it," Kender says. "And we used it to make a videogame." More investment came from various contacts and friends, who have proved patient ever since, since they were initially sold on a game that spanned a huge world before the sheer detail of the game they found themselves making caused ZA/UM to squeeze and focus in on one small coastal town location. At this point the game was called *No Truce With the Furies* and it was announced with a late 2017 release date. But then the game overspilled that single location and into the capital, at which point it was renamed *Disco Elysium* and delayed into 2019. "We've had to move goalposts tens of times," Kender admits.

Back during the first year, however, the team had to find its visual style, to figure out the way it'd tell its story, and generally figure out how to be a development studio. The fundamentals of its art were based on Rostov's work for Kurvitz's novel, but in the early months Kurvitz would go to Rostov's place to write as Rostov painted, ▶







FROM LEFT **members of ZA/UM's London studio, where Kender is based, plus a visiting Rostov, who works from Tallinn; the Brighton studio, where Kurvitz works with its writers; ZA/UM's studio in Tallinn**

looking over each other's shoulders. One breakthrough painting depicted a giant motorway running above dilapidated Eastern European buildings in Revachol, the world's capital city. "It's basically America straddling poor old Eastern Europe, a motorway with no ramp, shooting off into the horizon," says Kurvitz. "Once we got its rose-silvery sky, we knew we had Revachol's feeling."

"It was such a nice, experimental, explorative time," says Rostov. "I prided myself on my knowledge of videogame history and how games have developed visually, and now I was in the position to be able to tap into these ideas and come up with a neat visual aesthetic in an actual game."

The dialogue system was a greater challenge, and where the studio's inexperience and Kurvitz's ambition collided. He wanted the act of playing *Disco Elysium* to feel like reacting naturally to the world, and its skill system, which reflects many different facets of your character's psyche, from your intellect to your addiction centres, is designed to do just that. The game constantly rolls checks against them to determine how they react, and they speak and interact with you, the player, as if they're secondary characters.

And the dialogue itself also had to feel natural. "We wanted it so you don't notice that you're reading. This is the most important part of how to make books fun. Reading is only enjoyable when you forget that you're reading, because reading is not fun. No one wants to fucking read." Kurvitz wanted to avoid the typical way RPGs feed words to their players in chunks of expository lines. "How to get it into a fast, ticking form for a brain that's been fed on Twitter and Tumblr? It was hellish to understand the logic structures that have to go into a talking skills system and how they interweave and how it looks from the inside."

Then it had to be made into a system that ten writers can use. Currently, ZA/UM comprises 35 in-house developers, so writers comprise nearly a third of its overall headcount – before its 20-odd contractors, anyway. Kurvitz describes *Disco Elysium* as "the hardest writing job on the planet right now" because of its quickfire dialogue, its density of alternative through-lines and perspectives, not to mention the fact it's a detective game, so there also has to be total logical consistency. But from *Disco Elysium*'s early demos, ZA/UM appears to have nailed it.

"THE FIRST JOB INTERVIEW WE DID WAS IN THE ATTIC, LITERALLY BESIDE A PILE OF PIGEON SHIT"

For most of the past four years, it has worked out of a squat in an ex-gallery in Tallinn's old town, because it was large, cheap, and next door to where the producer lived. "The first job interview we did was in the attic, literally beside a pile of pigeon shit," says Rostov. But over this year Kender and Kurvitz, along with many of the writers, have emigrated. In 2016, ZA/UM managed to secure a first round of venture capital financing, which enabled Kurvitz to secure a soundtrack from the band British Sea Power, and in visiting them in Birmingham he realised the UK felt like home, and also a good source of the developers and talent they'd need to complete the game. "Things just rolled from there; we have Mikee W Goodman from [progressive metal band] SikTh doing VO for us. If you're in Eastern Europe, you're dying for VO. The accents are horrible! You can't make a normal western voice, so you're trapped."

And yet ZA/UM is a product of Estonia. *Disco Elysium*'s crumbling city and compromised characters don't depict Estonia's history, but they reflect it. "Our generation is very much formed by the collapse of the Soviet Union, of the '90s Tallinn and Estonia, which was a gruesome time," says Rostov. "It was gave rise to the music that we grew up listening to, with serious lyrics and conceptual heft. Estonia isn't that place any more. Now it's loser-ville. We made Skype, we became e-residents of the e-capital of the world. The sweet stuff is already gone."

That kind of bitterness and anger, ZA/UM hopes, will travel outside Estonia's border now that Kurvitz lives in Brighton, while Kender runs its London office ("You know, the Barbican Centre is like a pocket of the Soviet Union"). And Kurvitz hopes that its wider themes will also resonate with a wider generation. "The main character is, I guess, an overbloated avatar who's gone wrong for a long time, but he's in pain because he's still resisting. This fight and need to have strength to go on, we've noticed that this isn't only Eastern European."

ZA/UM is good at fighting, from its founding in disaffection to its gumption to make a game as ambitious as *Disco Elysium*. "This creative outlet for us was incredibly difficult to achieve, and every day I'm making fucking sure I'm putting every piece of anger and pain into it." ■



❶ The many faces of the player character cop, whose personality can encompass the analytical investigator through to bruiser. ❷ Revachol's residents can be every bit as colourful and eccentric as its player character. ❸ *Disco Elysium*'s character design echoes its setting: familiar and yet somewhat strange, future and yet past. ❹ Revachol features triumphant statues among its assortment of tired and broken buildings. ❺ Your cop partner is the patient Kitsaragi, who plays by the rules, and in so doing teaches them to you



REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Destiny 2: Forsaken PS4
This month brought worrying signs that suggest old habits die a little too hard for Bungie. A much-hyped murder-mystery quest amounted to perhaps an hour of actual gameplay, spread over three weeks' worth of timegates. The reward, however, puts those fears to rest. Thunderlord, a returning *Destiny 1* machine gun, is an absolute monster, and a reminder of all the progress Bungie has made in 2018.

Ultra Street Fighter II: The Final Challengers Switch
This overhauled classic may have felt too expensive at Switch's launch, but we've more than had our money's worth. It's the ideal filler game for the final half hour of a long journey, Capcom's combination of 2017's combos and 1992's damage model making for the most absurdly enjoyable run through Arcade mode you'll ever have.

Sea Of Thieves Xbox One
Rare has been busy filling its hypnotically pretty ocean with extra missions, limited-time events – and fresh horrors, it seems. Panic ensues when we hop back in for a laid-back session with a new crewmate and end up sailing our sloop into the jaws of a hungry megalodon. We'd like to take this opportunity to apologise unreservedly to our cohabitants for all the screaming.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

...and the kitchen sink

Less is rarely more in videogames, where a sequel is only judged to be as good as the number of new bullet points on its announcement press release. Good design, however, is often about what you take out, not what you put in. It's another example of the awkward spot in which games find themselves: art, yet technology; playthings, but products.

Still, we doubt Bethesda was purposely going for a minimalist design while it was making *Fallout 76* (p110). After all, the game represents the publisher's first foray into the game-as-service arena – a sort-of-genre in which the early, and quite obvious, consensus appears to be that you need to make a massive world and fill it to bursting with things to do in order to keep people playing. Yet *Fallout 76* is quiet. Too quiet. Not only by the standards of this en-vogue way of making games, either: it is a good deal emptier, and markedly less interesting, than the singleplayer *Fallout*s that preceded it.



There is, of course, such a thing as going too far in the other direction, and during the lengthy, painstakingly detailed Direct broadcasts about seemingly every character, mode and idea that has been stuffed into *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* (p102), we'll admit to wondering whether Masahiro Sakurai might have lost the plot. Yet working with 70-plus characters appears to have given *Smash*'s creator the impetus to make the series' best instalment to date.

In this, the busiest Play section of the year, perhaps it's hard to make the argument that less is more. Yet if it's proof of that you're after, *Tetris Effect* has you more than covered. Its component parts are simple: it is *Tetris* by way of *Lumines*, and that tells you pretty much everything you need to know about one of the most beguiling, surprising and, yes, very best games of the year.

Super Smash Bros Ultimate

Masahiro Sakurai doesn't work at Nintendo. It's easy to forget that, with *Super Smash Bros* having grown from a secretive side project to become one of the company's flagship series. Yet there remains a degree of separation; Sakurai is an outsider looking in. Bear that in mind and you can understand why, despite starring so many Nintendo favourites, *Smash* has never quite felt the same as those other big firstparty games. It has always been an anomaly: faster, weirder, more chaotic, less elegant than its labelmates. Nintendo has historically talked about design by subtraction, creativity prospering through self-imposed limitation. Sakurai, by contrast, has always favoured the kitchen-sink approach. If in doubt, just add more, and then keep adding more besides – and boy, does *Ultimate* take that approach to extremes. It is a monument to excess. In terms of sheer volume – of characters, features, modes, options, and more – this is surely the biggest game Nintendo has ever published. And never has Sakurai's MO made as much sense as it does here.

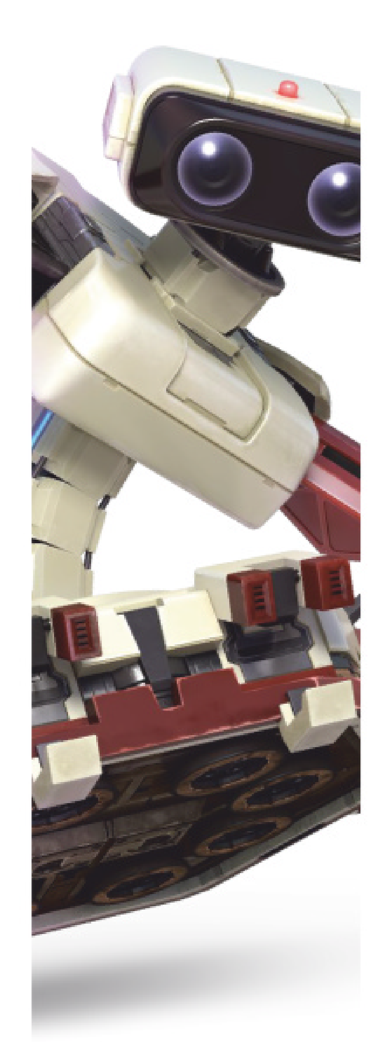
It's exemplified by the new Spirits mode. Here, it seemed, was a throwaway singleplayer mode, designed to give *Ultimate* something more than a few new fighters and stages to distance it from the four-year-old *Smash Bros U*. Not so. Spirits is as generous as it is surprising, inviting you to unlock the full, groaning roster of characters by exploring and steadily demisting a vast, intricate map stuffed with pipes, portals and puzzles – and not just dozens but *hundreds* of individual fights.

A lavish CG cinematic sets up the story of an evil puppet master, who has enslaved these spirits within marionettes: basically, red-eyed versions of the various fighters. It's almost as if the cast here are cosplaying as the many characters who didn't make the cut. Sakurai and Sora have put some serious thought in how best to represent each of the picks. Take *Rhythm Tengoku*'s Chorus Kids, here played by three Jigglypuffs who constantly sing throughout the battle. A pink Bayonetta equipped with a banana gun makes for the perfect Candy Kong. Then there's Solid Snake as *Hotel Dusk*'s Kyle Hyde, in a battle set against the skyscrapers of Fourside at night, with the stage sporadically fogging up. Every fight has clever or comic touches like this, prompting a nod or chuckle of nerdy recognition among those who really know their Nintendo. There's a bit of cheeky self-awareness on Sakurai's part, too, with a few spirits seemingly referencing some of the myriad rumours and leaks in the build-up to every Direct. Just wait until you see who's playing Rayman. Spoilers? Hardly. Not when there are several-hundred similar surprises in store.

Once beaten, these spirits can be equipped for later battles, essentially acting as difficulty modifiers. Primary spirits boost your attack and defensive power, and each comes with empty slots into which you can place support spirits, which convey a bewildering range of

Developer Sora Ltd, Bandai Namco Studios
Publisher Nintendo
Format Switch
Release December 7

In terms of sheer volume this is surely the biggest game Nintendo has ever published



effects. If a stage hazard threatens to reverse your controls, there are spirits that will negate that; ditto for poisoned areas, while others resist fire and ice. You might want to increase your dash speed or start with a ranged weapon against an elusive rival. And if all else fails, and you've got three slots free, you can just equip yourself with an Ore Club and blow your opponent away. Though some spirit types are stronger against others, combined power trumps all. It's something to consider before each challenge; likewise the fact that you'll earn better rewards if you choose to handicap yourself than if there's a large power disparity in your favour.

You'll even find hints of *Pokémon* and *Persona* in there, with some spirits capable of evolving to more powerful forms when they reach maximum level, albeit resetting to level one in the process. Others can only be made by fusing the cores from two or more unwanted spirits. Again, there's an underlying logic: to get *Star Fox*'s General Pepper, you'll need the cores of *Metal Gear*'s Roy Campbell and a Labrador Retriever from *Nintendogs*. And if they still aren't giving you the attributes you need, you can retrain them at dojos scattered across the map.

The level of granularity is absurd, since it's your fighting skills that fundamentally determine the outcome. Yet it would be wrong to say the effects aren't noticeable: especially on the harder fights, the right spirits can mean the difference between a humbling defeat and a squeaky triumph. If you're less invested in the process, or simply finding it too time-consuming, an auto-select lets you cycle between recommended loadouts. Either way, eventually you'll have enough spirits to cope with pretty much anything thrown your way, including the various stage hazards. Though, as ever with *Smash*, there's no accounting for the luck of the item drops.

It is quite ludicrously large. After a full morning we'd uncovered a tiny fraction of the map on Normal difficulty. By the end of a solid two days' play, we'd visited every corner, the fog having lifted entirely – and without wishing to give the game away, that's by no means the end. It's almost too much, in the best possible way. If *Smash* has seemed like a game to dip into every now and again – and for all its size, Spirits can easily be enjoyed in short bursts – here's a mode that puts it alongside the biggest games on other consoles, giving it a long-term hook for solo players it hasn't really had before. A few may miss those extravagantly daft cutscenes, but in every other sense it trumps *Brawl*'s Subspace Emissary.

More importantly, it compensates for the lack of a training mode in the 3DS and Wii U versions, too. By forcing you into so many diverse scenarios against the full range of characters, it invites you to adapt to different combat situations and techniques. Stamina matches against opponents with super armour will ▶







ABOVE You'll be alerted to mid-battle changes by text at the top of the screen, but you're given advance warning of what to expect on the pre-fight screen, giving you the chance to prepare accordingly

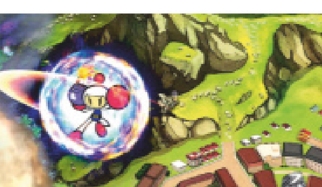
MAIN Visually speaking, it may not look much of an advance on the Wii U game, but it runs remarkably smoothly in both docked and undocked mode, and feels a little more readable than its predecessor when the action is at its busiest. ABOVE Isabelle's Final Smash traps adjacent opponents in a hurriedly constructed Town Hall. These moves play out much faster than before, getting you back to the action quicker – though you still have a degree of control over a few. RIGHT K.Rool is arguably the pick of the heavyweights, with high damage output and a decent recovery move. In one of the countless charming little details, that belly armour will crack if he should take a few hard hits



teach you how to get in and out without taking hits; after several battles against the clock you'll know exactly how to deal with opponents that guard or run away a lot. And by limiting you to the characters you've unlocked, it gives you the opportunity to get to know ones that might not be your favourites. The effort to attain new ones tempts you to use them straight away – and even if, after a while, you return to a comfortable fallback, it gives you greater knowledge of this huge roster. Elsewhere, there's a mode that pulls a similar trick, putting you in for a series of battles but banning characters you've already used.

You could argue that *Ultimate* makes you work a little too hard to get your hands on the newcomers. *Animal Crossing*'s Isabelle might well be the pick of the fresh faces, and not just for the wonderful moment where she and three clones are cast as *Ouendan*'s cheerleaders. She's got a multi-purpose fishing rod, which can reel opponents in (the bait can be cast and left for a little while if no one's near) before she flings them away, and which doubles as a recovery move, latching onto edges as a last resort. *Castlevania*'s Simon Belmont has the stilted, deliberate walk of his 2D counterpart, but with a chain with decent range and a cross that can be thrown sideways or lobbed forwards in an arc, he's well worth mastering. Of the big boys – all archetypically slow but powerful – fire Pokémon Incineroar is a solid grappler, while King K.Rool can stomp opponents into the ground, leaving them temporarily incapacitated, and ripe for smashing. *Splatoon*'s Inklings are a tricksy option, splattering others to steadily deplete their health, but requiring space to top up their supply; still, their squid jump is a handy way out of a jam.

There are yet more spirits available through time-limited events, though their challenge matches their



MARIO CARTOGRAPHY
The hand-painted world map borrows a trick from *Super Mario World* by turning navigation into its own little puzzle. Periodically, you'll come up against an obstacle, for which you need to have unlocked a particular spirit to get past: you'll need a certain Man with a bomb to remove large boulders, for example. The clues are hardly cryptic – "If you knew how to pilot a boat, you could cross the lake" is one – but in these moments it feels as if you're being tested on your videogame knowledge, or at least encouraged to hazard an educated guess to who might be able to help, before heading off to find them. It's a small thing, but the perfect example of how *Ultimate* makes a game out of everything.

Land a powerful smash and the camera sometimes zooms in to the point of impact. The screen darkens, the sound dampens and the action freezes. Reminiscent of *Fire Emblem*'s critical hits, they make for an exciting flourish

rarity, and you've only got one shot to earn them. In truth, there are ways and means to get a second chance, but that sense of playful risk is a near-constant in *Ultimate*. It's there, too, in Classic mode, where each character gets a campaign comprising six battles, a bonus game and a climactic boss encounter. Here, you're presented with a giant scrolling mural of all the characters. The more you up the ante, the more you'll see of it, and the better the rewards you'll earn. Yet if Sora is keen for players to challenge themselves to improve, it's more than happy to accommodate newcomers: alongside the usual handicaps, there's now an 'underdog boost' that increases attack power for struggling fighters. To list and explain all the modes and options would probably take us the entirety of the Play section. Suffice it to say, if you can't find a way to enjoy *Ultimate* then you're probably not looking hard enough – and when even the menus are snappy and enjoyable to navigate, why wouldn't you?

Ultimate doesn't solve all *Smash*'s problems. Yes, Bayonetta's been nerfed, but it's still extremely tempting to spam Pikachu's comically effective down-special, and those Gust Bellows are still deeply, deeply annoying unless you're the one wielding them. But it's harder than ever to resist embracing the chaos, because with so many ingredients it's bound to surprise you more often than not. As its title suggests, this is a sequel that pulls out all the stops, as you sense that Sakurai is going all-out to indulge his inner nerd for maybe the final time. It's a rapturous celebration, not just of Nintendo, but videogames as a whole. Now for pity's sake, let the poor man have a rest.

9

Post Script

Could Ultimate be Sakurai's Final Smash? And if so, where does he go next?

There's a little-known Japanese adventure game from 1999, released by Pax Softnica (the studio which helped out on *Mother* and *EarthBound*) when the SNES was in its twilight days, that goes by the name of *Famicom Bunko: Hajimari no Mori*. It begins with a young city boy starting his summer holiday in the country, when he falls down a hill and briefly encounters an enigmatic young woman. And yes, believe it or not, she shows up in *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*'s Spirits mode, as 'Girl from Hajimari no Mori', played by the female villager from *Animal Crossing*.

It's at this moment – not when we clapped eyes on the final fighter-select screen, nor when we first realised the full enormity of the Spirits mode map – that we found ourselves wondering where on Earth the series goes from here. The titular rabbit from DSiWare-exclusive perspective puzzler *Looksley's Line-Up* is one thing, but this? You can't really get much more obscure.

In other words, the cuts are getting deeper just as the roster is growing larger. On a TV screen it looks faintly ridiculous even before you have all characters unlocked. In handheld mode, you almost need to squint to make everyone out. And the soundtrack? Heaven knows how Sora managed to squeeze all this onto a Switch game card, let alone how many favours Sakurai had to call in to get so many composers to contribute remixes of old standards, new favourites and selected obscurities besides. There's a prize for unlocking over 750 tracks; all in all, you'll find more than 900 pieces. Who needs Spotify?

The point being: *Smash* can't really get much bigger, and there's probably little point in any potential follow-up trying. So how did it get to this point? This modest fourplayer fighting game, developed in secret at HAL Laboratory by a Nintendo fan with the help of a man who would become the company's president, has ballooned in size as it has in popularity. *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* is now a monument to excess, an unwieldy behemoth stuffed to the gunwales with, well, stuff. Beyond the frenzied, anything-goes action, it's a veritable feast of modes, music and menus, with more game types than you could ever want, and so many options you'll barely bother with a fraction of them.

In the past, it's felt like a natural escalation, beholden to the unwritten rule that sequels must be bigger than their predecessors. Yet there's something telling about the way *Ultimate* gathers together all the fighters from previous versions of the game for one gargantuan blowout. For all that *Ultimate* feels like a celebration, it's hard not to think it might also mean goodbye – at least for the man who made it. There's the name, for starters: whether you take the definition to mean the acme of achievement or the more sobering one suggesting finality, it's clear that this represents some kind of culmination – if not an absolute end point, then at least the end of this particular era.

For all that Ultimate feels like a celebration, it's hard not to think it might also mean goodbye

Look, too, at that opening sequence of Spirits mode where everyone – apart from Sakurai's beloved Kirby, of course – effectively dies. Yes, over the course of the game you essentially bring them back to life. But there's something symbolic about the image: this feels like a man killing his darlings. Sakurai originally left HAL because he'd grown bored of making Kirby sequels; it's not much of a stretch to imagine he's ready to move on from *Smash*, if only for his own health. His gag in the recent Direct about wondering when he might be able to take a break was delivered in a way that suggested he was only half-joking at best.

If it is indeed time for Sakurai to move on, where could the series go without him? A shift to a more serious competitive focus doesn't seem to be on the cards. For one, it would betray the original idea behind the game. It was developed, after all, as a reaction to other fighting games, which relied on systems that were arcane to the average player. *Smash*, with its combination of popular characters and simple mechanics, was immediately appealing to a much broader audience.



And despite having supported the game as an esport, it wouldn't really be the Nintendo way to narrow its appeal. Sure, there's that new Final Smash meter, a lift from other fighting games, where taking damage eventually gives you the opportunity to pull off a weaker version of your Final Smash. But that feels more like a way to give beginners, who'll inevitably take a pummelling, a chance at exacting revenge: a sop to casual players rather than the *Smash* hardcore.

Besides, *Smash* is already a fixture at Evo – albeit much to the chagrin of many a fighting-game connoisseur. With such a huge roster, *Ultimate* is going to spawn plenty of surprising match-ups, unless one or two characters aren't as balanced as first impressions suggest (these sort of things only really emerge after dozens of hours of online play, after all). Besides, with GameCube controller support and all of Melee's fighters included, maybe we'll just need the one version of *Smash* at Evo next year.

And for the foreseeable future, for that matter. You'd think, after all this – not to mention the five DLC characters to come – no one could possibly want for anything more. Yet Nintendo fans' collective appetite for sequels appears to be insatiable. With or without Sakurai, future editions of *Smash* are all but assured – even if it might take a long while for Nintendo to even consider how to follow this. ■

Tetris Effect

Tetris Effect is at its best when you forget you are playing *Tetris*. That's not as surprising as it might seem: puzzle games – of which *Tetris* remains the king – are all about the zen-like flow state you enter when playing well. It's a sensation that's formed the focal point of Tetsuya Mizuguchi's latest game, and has been taken to unprecedented heights thanks to the sort of audiovisual spectacle that has become the *Rez* creator's calling card. So yes, when things are going well, you forget you're playing *Tetris*. The notion of thumbs working a controller fades away, and everything just sort of happens in front of you. Yet here you'll also forget you're playing *Tetris* because you're a virtuoso pianist in the middle of a jazz wig-out. You're the festival DJ working the crowd into a frenzy before the drop. You're the mystical shaman, directing prayers with a thunderous tribal rhythm.

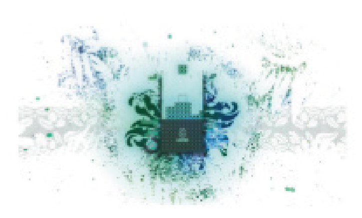
All the while, you are stacking blocks, tidying up, though the core business of *Tetris* has never felt like such a background activity. The playing field is set well back, occupying a fraction of the display – a decision that serves a dual purpose, reducing eye strain in long virtual-reality sessions while also maximising the impact of the Mizuguchi madness that's kicking off around it. You can zoom in using the left stick, but doing so breaks the spell somewhat; like a good album, this is at its best when experienced as its creator intended.

Indeed, that's the best way to think of *Tetris Effect*'s main mode, Journey. It's an album, or a DJ mixtape, or a concert performance, with a rigid setlist (while you can play individual songs, there's no option to compile a playlist of your favourites, or even to change the running order). Split into sections of between three and five songs, Journey mode is a tightly curated mix from a selector who doesn't take requests, and is fully deserving of its name. Even individual songs have a sense of movement, of a voyage – of, yes, a trip (the game's development codename, and with good reason). Deserted, the opening track of Journey's standout chapter, starts with you looking out over a herd of camels in some sun-parched foreign land. The camera pulls up and away, the sun sinks over the horizon, before you settle on the Moon to watch a buggy roll slowly around, kicking up particle effects from the crust.

Just as Journey mode forces you to play to its rhythm, so the backing track dictates the pace and style of your play. Moving a falling block plays a certain sound effect; likewise a rotation, a block clicking into place, or a line clear. This is nothing new for Mizuguchi, who was doing this stuff in *Lumines* almost 15 years ago. Yet it has never felt so *right*. There's some clever stuff going on behind the scenes, you suspect, the response to your inputs delayed imperceptibly to ensure they sync up perfectly with the music. In Downtown Jazz, another highlight, each rotation plays a flurry of notes, which hides any off-time movements while also making you feel like the greatest pianist that ever tickled an ivory. It's intoxicating stuff, and you'll often find yourself thinking of the music far more than the puzzling.

Developer Monstars, Resonair
Publisher Enhance Games
Format PS4, PSVR (both tested)
Release Out now

Journey mode is a tightly curated mix from a selector who doesn't take requests



SLOW AND LOW
Zone mode, available after you fill a meter by clearing lines, slows time to a crawl, the music and visuals fading away for a spell. Here you can clear out the board without advancing the line counter that governs your progress through a certain song, and it notionally serves two purposes: letting veterans go for high scores in search of SS ranks, and giving the less skilled a chance to clear out the board during a tricky phase. While it serves those purposes well enough, we frequently find ourselves ignoring it. Its design, like a super combo or ultimate ability, means you don't want to use it now in case you really need it later. Moreover, why would you want to deprive yourself of the festival of sound and light that makes the game truly sing?

You'll come to prize restraint in your play as much as, if not more than, success. At Normal difficulty, songs require you to clear 36 lines; if it has three sections, it will move between them after every 12 clears. If you're playing one of your favourites, you'll want to keep it going for as long as possible. It's here that *Tetris Effect* becomes more performance than game, one you un-play, letting blocks drop at natural speed as you rotate and move them around in (seemingly) perfect time. And when you're ready, you slam down a *Tetris* or two, the music kicking up a gear, the visuals getting ever more intense as you move on to the next phase.

It's at moments like these that you start to wonder whether this might be the best thing Tetsuya Mizuguchi has ever made. It certainly contains enough individual moments of wonder – where music, visuals and mechanics collide in ways to make every hair on your body stand on end at once – to rank alongside his best. And there's a unique feeling to it, a cleansing sort of bliss that makes it a wonderful game to dip into after a rough day. There's a noticeable resolution drop when moving from TV to PSVR – something that wasn't a problem for *Rez Infinite*'s 15-year-old graphics – but it soon fades. While it's a wonderful game on a good TV, it's something else entirely in VR, a sort of sensory isolation tank where you can forget about your troubles and let the sights and sounds wash over you.

There are problems, sure. Perhaps the biggest comes when the game reminds you that you're playing *Tetris*. The pace can change suddenly, and violently, during certain songs, and while you'll eventually learn when trouble's coming, you'll often wish that such a soothingly psychedelic game wasn't quite so fond of turning into a bad trip at the drop of a beat. The final Journey stage, Metamorphosis, has a ludicrously speedy final stretch that feels at odds with its ten-minute runtime. And it wards you off the other modes: suffice it to say that Marathon, which reaches superhuman speeds at its peak, might as well not be in our copy of the game. It's quite the spectacle on YouTube, mind.

It wouldn't be a Mizuguchi symphony without a few bum notes, though, and the tremendous, yet weirdly cleansing thrill of Journey ensures *Tetris Effect* is essential despite its peaks and troughs. It is a game to be snacked on, rather than devoured, a collection of 15-minute mixtapes that take you from desert to ocean to space and beyond, showering your nerve centres in particles, beefy kickdrums and warm synths. It is a game you've played a thousand times before – yet there is nothing else quite like it.

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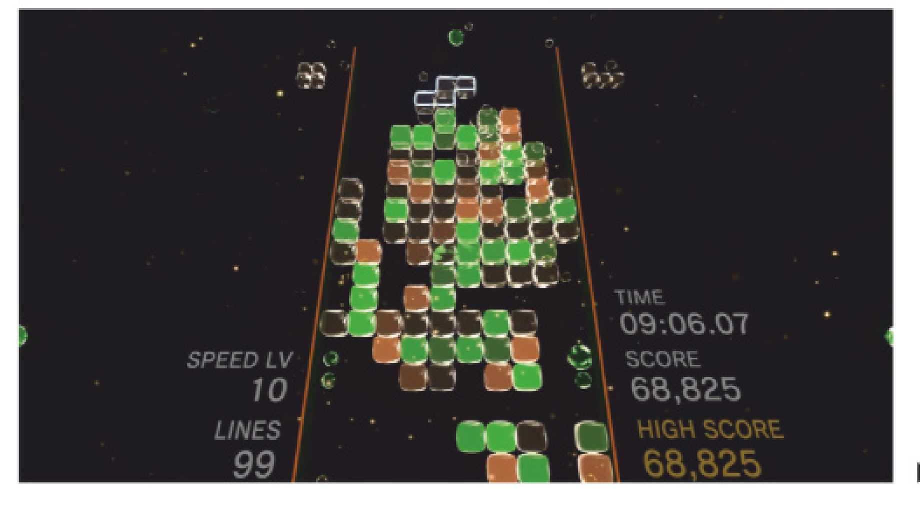


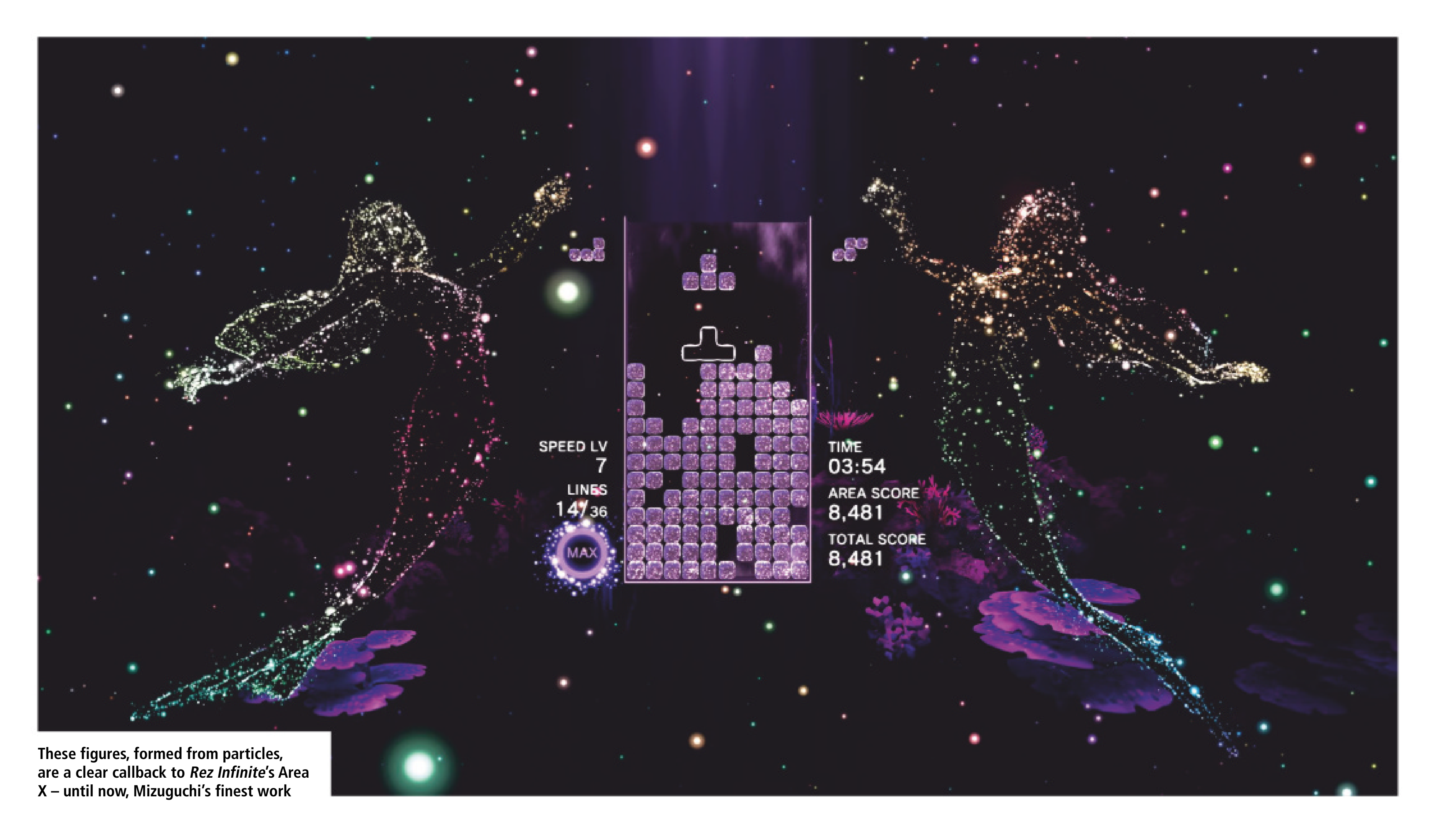
LEFT Music snobs can leave their snootiness at the door. We guarantee you'll fall in love with this number's warming Euro trance. **MAIN** There's a constant, though unspoken theme of cleansing, care and togetherness to the game. It's a love letter to the environment and life in all its forms, but is never too obvious about it. **BOTTOM** Mystery mode throws stage, block and perspective gimmicks at you, but its innate randomness mean it's not something you'll play often





ABOVE While song BPM varies across Journey mode, there's a steady progression in difficulty. By the final third even midtempo pop numbers will subject you to a few sudden, hair-raising increases in game speed





These figures, formed from particles, are a clear callback to *Rez Infinite*'s Area X – until now, Mizuguchi's finest work

Post Script

Charting Tetsuya Mizuguchi's endless search for the impossible

Lumines was defined by its timeline. Tetsuya Mizuguchi's 2005 puzzle game was all about this sweeping metronome, which moved from left to right across the screen, synced to the current song's BPM, and removed completed blocks as it passed them. It was confusing at first, particularly during slower numbers, when you'd expect the game to be easier by virtue of the lower tempo. Yet it could often be the opposite, that timeline taking an age to remove clutter from a screen that was getting agonisingly close to full.

The result was a game that insisted you play by its rules, for all that you appeared to have control over the pace of the puzzling and the sounds that were being layered over the soundtrack. In such moments, synaesthesia, the dream which has come to characterise Mizuguchi's long career, feels agonisingly out of reach. You cannot achieve a perfect synthesis of audio, visuals and game when the latter insists on being louder in the mix, volume-creeping like a frustrated warm-up DJ desperate for the crowd's attention.

It's a recurring problem in Mizuguchi's quest for synaesthesia, which was famously sparked by a night out at a Swiss festival when he was scouting locations for *Sega Rally*. *Rez*, the game in which he first started experimenting with the concept, had all the building blocks: a throbbing club soundtrack, a dizzying light show dressed up as a rail shooter, and sonically appropriate effects for every mechanical interaction available to you. Yet it was, at its core, a shoot-'em-up, and in the thick of a boss battle you were too busy staying alive to think about whether your shots were properly lining up with the music.

So it is here, at times – in particular when Journey mode defies *Tetris* convention and suddenly ratchets up the game speed by ten levels at once. Yet the elegance with which sound effects are layered on top of the backing track means that, even when you're focused entirely on staying alive, the music still sounds like, well, music.

And for the rest of the game, when you feel in control and *Tetris Effect* becomes a performance piece first and a game second, you may wonder whether Mizuguchi has finally done it. Certainly *Tetris* is perfectly suited to Mizuguchi's vision of videogame synaesthesia, since it is a game that is often most efficiently played by *not* playing. Yes, *Tetris* is a game in which you must arrange blocks into solid horizontal lines. But you spend most of your time in the game not quite doing that, building an elaborate, beautiful structure with an entire column left empty, waiting for the I-block that will clear four lines at once. Mizuguchi's games are at their best when you are able to un-play them in order to let the music and visuals share equal prominence with the mechanics. No puzzle game has ever been so brilliantly un-playable as *Tetris*. No wonder Mizuguchi first sought the licence over a decade ago.

Tetris Effect brings Mizuguchi within touching distance of his goal, but can he ever really reach it? A game is a game, after all, and if the aim is to make our mechanical involvement in proceedings entirely invisible, you might as well just make a visualiser. It seems as if perfect synaesthesia is always going to be tantalisingly out of reach, and perhaps it's better that way – if only because it will keep Mizuguchi, and the talented teams he is working with in Japan, on the hunt for it.

It explains, too, his newfound obsession with VR (though he claims to have longed for it since he first had the idea for *Rez*). If a true synthesis of light, sound and play is never quite going to be possible, you might as well work towards it using a technology which makes the already immersive even more so. *Rez Infinite* and *Tetris Effect* are wonderful games on a TV but, through a headset, transport you to an entirely different plane. We can't wait to find out where Enhance will take us next. ■

Fallout 76

For months they waited. Sequestered in a bunker deep beneath Appalachia, they dreamed of building grand new settlements, forming a society and making their mark on a landscape left barren by an atomic blast. The mood was optimistic. What new possibilities awaited topside? What new friendships might be forged out there? And then came Reclamation Day. The vault doors opened, sunlight flooded in, and in the cold light of day all hope was extinguished.

The irony of *Fallout 76*'s narrative can't possibly pass you by as you take those first tentative steps into its considerable world map. This is a game about disaster and desolation told, quite inadvertently, by disastrous design and a desolate core gameplay loop. Irradiated hounds with rusted bicycles glitched through their bodies as if skewered by the force of the bomb blast; building after deserted building with nothing beyond audio tape logs or computer terminals to interact with; exchanging emotes with passing strangers before returning to the lonely business of running between quest markers. It's a multiplayer experiment whose own developers never seemed totally confident in at its conference showings, and which reveals itself to be fundamentally flawed after just a few hours of play.

Far from the traditional solo RPG the series' name conjures, this is shared-world survival in Pip-Boy cosplay. Up to 24 players can inhabit one iteration of the world map, which is geographically at least as interesting as those of *Fallout* 3 and 4. And those players can impact the world significantly, in theory. Arming and launching a nuke kills every living being in a large swathe of map space and leaves radiation in the vicinity. Building a large settlement changes the face of a particular area, and teaming up to take on a raid allows players to complete objectives that would otherwise be impossible. On paper, Bethesda has adapted the *Fallout* blueprint into a coherent multiplayer survival game.

The reality, inevitably, is that you want *Fallout 76* to play like a *Fallout* game, and on those terms it fails to satisfy. After all, how could you not want that from it? It goes to such great lengths to recall former glories, inviting back the signifiers of its esoteric 1950s kitsch such as posh English robots, cutesy Pip-Boy minigames, MacGyvered firearms and cosy vault dwellings. Even the VATS system, wholly incompatible though it seems with realtime multiplayer, finds its way into *Fallout 76* as an auto-aim function. But from the second you wake up in Vault 76 and enter a character creator near-identical to its 2015 predecessor's, you have the unshakeable sensation that you're playing someone else's *Fallout* game. A save file in which they have completed every quest and killed every single NPC, and never load up any more, because there's nothing left.

And so you wander out of the deserted vault, into an equally barren wilderness, tasked with hours of quests that amount to nothing more than reaching a map location, listening to an audio log and then either crafting or killing something, in almost completely unbroken silence. When you do bump into another player the interactions are almost always flimsy – an exchange of admittedly well-integrated emotes before going your separate ways, or an ignored headset mic salutation. Players will often accept invitations to join a party and simply wander off in a totally different direction than your intended quest marker, and refuse invitations just as frequently. They do this, one feels, because they want to play the solo *Fallout* experience on which the series' name was built, and every human player spotted bursts that bubble.

So universal is this rejection of *Fallout 76*'s most essential feature – co-op play – that player-built structures or dwellings are incredibly rare. The kind of neon-lit modular towns protected by turrets you'd expect players to build when they band together are thin on the ground in a way that totally subverts the survival norm. In *Ark* or *Conan Exiles* you can barely walk 50 paces before stumbling into a fortress built by a fearsomely well-organised guild. In *Fallout 76* the effects of human activity just aren't prevalent enough to make the endeavour feel worthwhile.

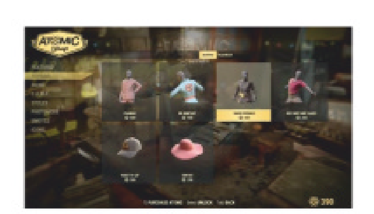
Amid the mess, you find moments of beauty and wonder. The audio logs, such as they are, tell a thoughtful, well-paced tale of Vault 76's first colonists meeting a hostile landscape they weren't prepared for, and being torn to shreds by the local flora and fauna. They're heartbreaking to listen to, not least because you long for the company of these absent NPCs after so many hours in Appalachia fending for yourself or banding together with largely mute human players. The score seems to be visiting from a different, better game in which there are moments of scripted drama to utilise the moody strings arrangements. A revamped perk system, in which you unlock cards and spend them in your character stat categories, offers a streamlined way to roll specialised builds, and is held back only by the inherent clumsiness of *Fallout 76*'s non-pausing menus.

There are moments of undeniable unified enjoyment when a gaggle of human survivalists take on a raid against high-level enemies and prevail, too – these are rare realisations of the kind of co-op fantasy everyone has had when playing a solo Bethesda RPG, but they represent only a small proportion of the whole. Given that *Fallout 76* is constructed so brazenly from the component parts of *Fallout 4*, there'll be loud and angry voices who'll have it that this is Bethesda simply hitching itself to the game-as-service bandwagon without any discernible creative or artistic imperative to match that commercial ambition. Out there in the miles of lonely wasteland, there's barely a dissenting voice to be found.

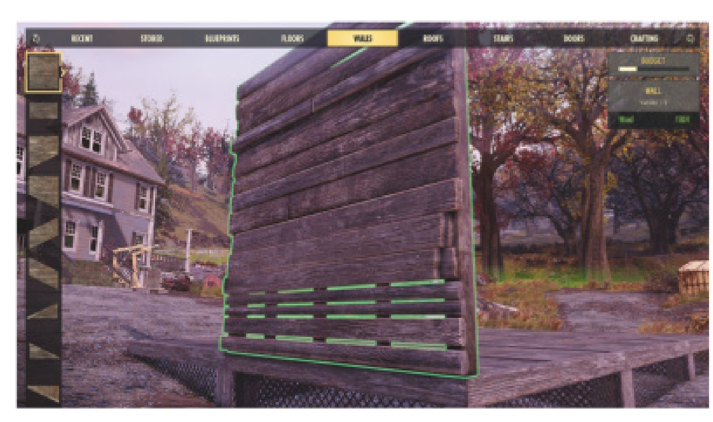
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Developer Bethesda Game Studios
Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Format PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

The effects of human activity just aren't prevalent enough to make the endeavour feel worthwhile



SPLITTING THE ATOMS
This being a major game release in 2018, naturally there's a tale of microtransaction controversy to tell. Its guise in *Fallout 76* is Atoms, a currency earned by completing quests and in-game achievements and also by spending real-world money. There's nothing freshly scandalous about that model, except that the Atom price for modest items such as laminate flooring or player outfits is surprisingly high. For the former, a payment of £3.99 ($4.99) in order to purchase 500 Atoms is required (400 of which are then spent on flooring), while an 800-Atom player costume required a £7.99 ($9.99) transaction to buy 1100 coins. There's more than a whiff of cynicism to the item Atom prices and the increments by which Atom packs increase, and the community has already noted this, and reacted in kind.



ABOVE Bethesda's building tool works just as well as it did in *Fallout 4* and it's bolstered by many new options. The dearth of any truly remarkable player-made buildings out in the world speaks volumes, however







TOP There's no point trying to deny how much we enjoyed stumbling upon this banjo and sitting at a ruined gas station playing until sunset. You've got to enjoy the little things, especially in a world so empty of other life.
MAIN PvP combat is possible, but both players have to agree to it by shooting each other. If a player doesn't return fire, they'll be resistant to damage and whoever kills them earns a warrant.
LEFT We failed this mission about killing fireflies, after five minutes of killing fireflies, by apparently killing too many fireflies. Perhaps the vault door can be closed again if we pull hard enough

Hitman 2

Developer IO Interactive
Publisher Warner Bros Games
Format PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

Orson Mills heads straight for the bottle of vodka on the counter when he enters the house, as you know he always does. In a parallel universe locked away in a different save slot there's rat poison waiting in his glass. In another universe still you're waiting on the roof, ready to poison the air supply to the panic room or shoot a single silenced bullet through the bedroom skylight into your target's skull. But not this time. This time the poison's been administered on the sugar cube Alma Reynard drops into her tea, and when it dissolves in her cup it sets forth a chain of events that ends with a kitchen knife through her neck, and a hasty exit across a moonlit New Zealand beach.

If IO's *Hitman* series has taught us nothing else since its maligned 2000 debut, it's taught us this: an assassin's two greatest weapons aren't silenced pistols and fibre wire, but eavesdropping and time travel. Now more than ever Agent 47 relies on the loose lips of passing strangers and his singular ability to attempt a hit over and over again until every target, bodyguard and civilian's movements appear to him like clockwork, ingrained into his memory by endless repetition. He is Bill Murray in Groundhog Day, but with murders.

Hitman 2 even presents a slice of picture-perfect American suburbia among its six locations, and although Whittleton Creek bears little resemblance to Punxsutawney upon the first playthrough, by the tenth you'll swear there's a hint of Sonny and Cher's I Got You, Babe playing in among the chatter of political canvassers, realtors, gardeners and fumigators. It's the broad design approach of its episodic predecessor taken to a further extreme. Whereas the mission stories in 2016's *Hitman* felt like an optional means to permeate its daunting locales, now they feel all but mandatory. Good luck navigating the sprawling Mumbai slums or the multiple neighbourhoods within Santa Fortuna without a mission marker lighting your path. And where repeated playthroughs revealed initially hidden levels of detail before, in *Hitman 2* there's no such coyness. Its levels are unashamedly overwhelming on the first visit, its menus telling you explicitly that this is a game designed to be played and replayed.

This isn't a major failing, but it is a shift in design that you might not expect from what's ostensibly a mission pack for the 2016 game. Little has changed mechanically between releases, but by honing in on the community's positive reception to Sapienza and similarly vast levels, IO has redefined the *Hitman* experience. It's a series of impressive venues for player-directed set-pieces that bears replaying, but it's no longer a stealth sandbox in the Blood Money or Contracts mould.

That much is evident when you're spotted in the cocaine fields of Santa Fortuna by Jorge Franco's heavily armed guards and you're left to watch Agent 47, a trained killer, stand impassively with a machete in his hand while four gunmen within slashing range shoot him to death. Interactions have become *so* contextual that there's very little opportunity to bungle an escape or Heath Robinson a hit gone awry, and the fact that melee weapons can't be used for melee combat is the flag-bearer for that shift.

An assassin's two greatest weapons aren't silenced pistols and fibre wire, but eavesdropping and time travel

Fortunately, the delights that reveal themselves when *Hitman 2* is played as intended – in one of several prescribed paths per level – are ample. Sniper missions return and all-new Ghost Mode multiplayer challenges more experienced assassins to eliminate five targets before an opponent, but it's the solo campaign where the substance is found. Its opener on Hawke's Bay is a surprise highlight: a beachside house in *Dear Esther*-esque twilight, no initial targets, and an ocean's worth of grim atmosphere lapping against the shore. That you enter the house without any targets to eliminate shows that IO's still capable of invention even this deep into the franchise, and the way Hawke's Bay turns your role on a dime from burglar to assassin presents delicious opportunities for forward planning. It's in these more contained, more readable environments that *Hitman 2* shines (Whittleton Creek is another fine example, likewise the finale on the Isle of Sgaig). You're able to hone in on the details, without the need to lean on Focus Mode every ten seconds or chase a mission marker, and before long every facet becomes familiar; manipulable. By your third visit to these locales you're ducking out of guards' sights and syncing up with NPC routines without thinking.

Of *Hitman 2*'s larger maps, Miami is the most exciting. It takes 47 to a race track, a novel setting for the series, presents a convincing sense of scale, and manages a few knowing jokes without breaking character entirely: coming across a man who knocked out a mascot in the underground car park in order to steal his disguise will prove a highlight to all but the most curmudgeonly killer. It's also a venue that makes the game's problems with reactivity starkly clear, given that the on-track fatality of your target's met with nary a mention on the podium and doesn't even summon a black flag from the race organisers. A level-wide dynamic shift might have sold the simulation more, but that's nitpicking in the face of cartoonish enjoyment.

There are moments to savour throughout *Hitman 2*, and they all have a corpse lying somewhere. The barber's chair in Mumbai and the platform beneath a statue of a cartel thug in Santa Fortuna. The Miami pit lane and the glass penthouse on Sgail. They no longer exist in an anything-goes stealth sandbox, instead forming part of a long checklist of linear objectives. But those objectives are of sufficient number and satisfaction to hold your attention, and reward repeated ventures into *Hitman 2*'s dark, detailed microcosms.

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ILLUSTRIOUS TARGETS
The 2016 *Hitman* enjoyed a prolonged lifespan after release thanks to Elusive Targets, and the time-sensitive missions return here. The first of the bunch, The Undying, stars Sean Bean as the target, representing a strategic shift in marketing between the two games and a reassuringly straight trajectory to Bean's stock-in-trade role as the man who gets killed. The similarity to *Hitman* 2016 runs deeper than Elusive Targets, though: all the missions and levels from that release are available in this game, ready to be re-replayed. It reinforces *Hitman 2*'s status as a quasi-sequel, the kind of release that might have been called a mission back in the olden days, albeit with a modern pricing strategy: give the old game away for free with the new.

ABOVE Despite appearances, Whittleton Creek has nothing specific to say about the USA's current political situation; perhaps that's a blessing given that the main plotline is hard enough to follow. RIGHT A bizarre blend of staggering environmental visuals and last-gen character models defines *Hitman 2*'s look, as it did *Hitman 2016*. The low NPC fidelity's offset by sheer onscreen numbers, though



BELOW Colombia is one of a number of photo-friendly sun-kissed destinations, but it lacks the memorable sleaze of greatest hits such as The Meat King's Party in *Hitman: Contracts*





ABOVE The real barber is keeping his wife company in a chest just around the corner, where they can presumably hear the gargles and blood spurts of this unfortunate customer. Non-lethal, but not non-mentally scarring

Battlefield V

Developer DICE
Publisher EA
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One (tested)
Release Out now

Battlefield V as it stands is a game of absences, for better and worse. There are the reassuringly perilous open spaces of its eight multiplayer maps, which reach across WW2 Europe from Norwegian slopes to the shimmering plateaus of North Africa, and which rank among the best DICE has ever created. The radiant Hamada map, in particular, is almost offputtingly uncluttered, its northernmost Conquest flags separated from the others by a gorge which gives snipers the drop on any would-be Montgomery fool enough to rush the bridge. In the French village of Aras, meanwhile, swathes of yellow canola provide a little more cover when hurrying towards the barns at the map's centre.

There are also the vacancies left by the game's new fortification system, with holographic sandbags and barbed wire thickets waiting to pop into being around each flag, as a wargame defined by terrain destruction belatedly discovers the ability to rebuild. These templates can be filled in by any player class, though only Engineers can raise more complex structures like machinegun nests. Capable of scores of variations per point thanks to their modular design, fortifications are an exquisite addition to an already strategic shooter, providing your team is wise enough to utilise them.

Less forgiveable are the gaps left in *Battlefield V*'s feature set by DICE's shift towards an Early-Access-style release format, with the bulk of the game's content to be added after launch. There is no co-op mission suite at the time of writing, and the current singleplayer offering consists of just three hour-long episodes. This spaced-out approach would be one thing in a free-to-play shooter, but in a full-price game there's a definite sense of having one's cake and eating it.

Battlefield has never been celebrated for its singleplayer, and the fifth game's War Stories do little to improve its standing. They're essentially a thinly narrativised introduction to multiplayer gadgets and mode rulesets, spiced up by a focus on less-known aspects of the war but too ham-fisted to do their occasional promise justice. The opener stars Billy Bridger, a bit-part from a straight-to-VHS Cockney heist movie who is somehow recast as a special forces hero. A series of stealthy search-and-destroy missions against dim-witted Germans, his missions are as tedious as the voice-acting is hysterical.

Things pick up in the second episode, which follows a Norwegian resistance fighter as she tracks a special-weapons project across mountains. A few nods to *The Long Dark* aside, it is notable for an exhilarating skiing mechanic which sadly hasn't made the leap to multiplayer (yet). The third chapter explores racism and colonialism through the eyes of a Senegalese soldier, and is a loose playing-out of Breakthrough mode, with players capturing positions in linear order. All of the missions are fairly open-ended, with multiple attack vectors per enemy position and a generous spread of weapon pick-ups, vehicles and weapon emplacements. As such, the lack of co-op support is rather bizarre.

If *Battlefield V*'s campaign is too lonely for its own good, its multiplayer has never been more sociable. Players now spawn into a four-head squad by default, regardless of mode, and while you're free to range at whim, there are powerful incentives to stick together. As in previous games, squadmates can spawn on each other, shaving precious moments off the trip from base to frontline. They can also now revive each other regardless of class, though Medics are able to do this faster and heal people outside their squads to boot.

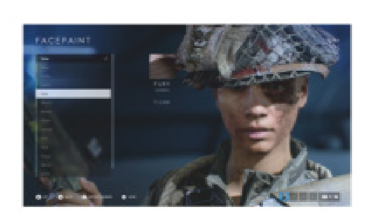
Completing squad actions such as resupplying friendlies earns points towards squad-limited streak rewards, called in by your squad leader, from V1 strikes to a special four-seater armoured vehicle. The impact on engagements is rarely dramatic, but one effect of questing for those rewards is a greater sense of intimacy within *Battlefield*'s often overwhelming army encounters – and a gentle degree of rivalry with allied squads. This new layer of teamplay sits naturally alongside the rhythms created by *Battlefield*'s proven class system, as Recon players tag foes for allies while Supports suppress attackers with light machineguns, only to be flanked by nimble Assault players.

One quirk of this *Battlefield*'s launch map line-up is its fondness for bridges. On Twisted Steel, a massive, half-wrecked suspension bridge rears above a sullen river and boggy farmland. In Rotterdam, train cars snake between elegant if battered terraced apartments, while another, ruined railway bridge spews shipping crates across the docks at Narvik. These structures give each map an obvious hook, something to gun for on first spawn. They also disguise the sumptuous intricacy of the surrounding terrain, every corner of every foreign field offering its own, engrossing play of sightlines, routes and cover spots. Many of the details are unearthed by the modes, which expose each map to different engagement criteria.

Such nuances aside, *Battlefield V* feels more significant for its adjustments to DICE and EA's business model than what it actually achieves at the level of play: it's more a question of stretching the same components across different production timeframes than meaningfully changing them. The possibilities of fortifications and the rejuvenated squad system will be alteration enough for returning fans, but won't attract many new converts, and the singleplayer is a watery afterthought. What's here is enough to be going on with, but we'll have to wait till next year's updates and in particular, that possibly seismic battle-royale mode, to discover whether this is truly a *Battlefield* that stands apart.

7

The possibilities of fortifications and the rejuvenated squad system will be alteration enough for returning fans



LEVELLING THE GROUND
Battlefield V's levelling system is uninspired, but inoffensive. Each class has two variants, the second unlocked at level eight – Assault players, for example, can opt for a variant that deals additional damage to vehicles and spot-marks them for allies in the bargain. Each weapon and class has its own unlock tree, and everything save weapon paint jobs and character skins is unlocked through play. Additional points for cosmetics can be unlocked through now genre-standard daily activities and optional assignments. Thankfully, DICE appears to have learned its lesson about grinding after nickel-and-diming players with *Battlefront II*'s unlocks: even if you're rubbish with a particular class, you can unlock a few upgrades in a couple of matches.

RIGHT The multiplayer's centrepiece is Grand Operations, a loose mini-campaign waged across different maps and modes, with match outcomes dictating the number of respawn tickets in the next. MAIN The script swings wildly between funereal solemnity and wisecracks. Throughout, the writers reach for emotional crescendos that each episode's short length simply can't justify. BOTTOM You'll earn match points for both building and destroying fortifications. It's especially important to memorise where healing and ammo resupply stations can be constructed









ABOVE There's a greater emphasis on map destruction than in *Battlefield 1*, thanks largely to the new fortification system. But *BF1*'s Behemoth supervehicles – as fun to blow up as they were to control – are MIA

11-11: Memories Retold

You seldom fire a gun in *11-11: Memories Retold*, and when you do, it is always an act with momentous implications, rather than videogames' customary background pulse of violence. It's a twofold rebuttal – on the one hand, a reaction to callous industry norms, and on the other, a challenge to the stereotype of the Great War as an event where the significance of the individual death is lost in a maelstrom of slaughter. If DigixArt and Aardman are bucking trends in this regard, however, their portrayal of the months leading up to peace in 1918 is familiar in many respects: an elegant, multiple-perspective narrative game, strewn with collectibles, that uses puzzles to facilitate its exploration of a terrible era.

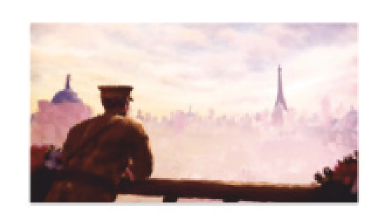
Fleeting and lightweight, the puzzles are designed to illustrate the characters and setting rather than challenge you, and there are a few that stick in the mind. As German signal officer Kurt, you move a stethoscope receiver to eavesdrop on Allied conversations through tunnel walls; in a tender touch, the same mechanic is used later to check a little girl's breathing after she falls unconscious. As Canadian war photographer Harry, meanwhile, you photograph scenes of frontline combat at the behest of a gung-ho officer, deciding which sights are most deserving of record. The puzzles are usually perceptible *as* puzzles, however, as ideas drawn from the history of videogames rather than mementos of the Great War, and many are generic. Among other things, you push crates around to clear routes, and pull levers to activate rope elevators. In this regard, *11-11*'s design feels at odds with its desire to create empathy for a forgotten reality: it's hard to feel the impact of the shells when you're embroiled in what is recognisably a fetch quest.

Then again, all this is perhaps to the purpose. Attempts to capture such events will always fall short, as gaps left by fading memories and patchy reportage are filled in by later artists, operating within different circumstances and somewhat at the mercy of their tools. We doubt they were intended as such, but the occasional awkwardness of *11-11*'s puzzles foregrounds its status as interpretation in a way that makes you better able to critique it – to appreciate how a wealth of period research has been chopped and arranged to suit the needs of a commercial artwork. The tension between reality and representation also informs the aesthetic, which eschews the hyperreal "immersiveness" of a *Battlefield 1* for a dreamy play of brushstrokes across 3D geometry, inspired by Impressionist art.

Rather than wrapping texture maps around contours, the engine applies each brushstroke in realtime, making choices about thickness and density depending on the camera's position: rather than fixing the past for contemplation, it suggests a past caught in the act of being fabricated. The results can be mesmerising. At No Man's Land in Vimy, you roam a confusion of volcanic colours sliced up by machine-gun bullets, the ground reddening underfoot like broken flesh. Elsewhere, the silhouette of the Eiffel Tower is swallowed by the pinks and violets of a winter sky. There is ugliness, of course, and not just the 'gritty', high-fidelity variety beloved of firstperson shooters. Underground areas are featureless smears of brown, and thinner objects shatter with proximity into wriggling ladders of brushstrokes. In an industry that worships at the altar of a realism more useful to graphics cards manufacturers than artists, there is much to be said for such imperfections and how they refuse to let the game's artificiality disappear.

Developer Aardman Animations, DigixArt
Publisher Bandai Namco
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

> Rather than fixing the past for contemplation, it suggests a past caught in the act of being fabricated



SNAP JUDGEMENTS
Harry's camera is the game's most intriguing device. It turns you into a collaborator, essentially, creating your own war memorial within that of the developer. In theory, your choice of pictures has wide-ranging ramifications, as Harry's photographs make their own way through the world and attract positive and hostile reactions, hours after you take them. It's spoiled, however, by game design which tags certain scenes as worthy of attention – a tacit reward mechanic, which frustrates attempts to assemble your own visual critique of the war. While some photographs will absolutely come back to haunt you, there are also too few opportunities to elicit reactions via your photos. Harry's sending photographs to his sweetheart Julia, in particular, is a sorely under-utilised source of dramatic tension.

The plot's chief means of deconstructing Great War myths is to show you the same events from two sides. Over five to ten hours you alternate between Harry and Kurt's perspectives – two parallel journeys that eventually intertwine. If the idea of establishing common ground between opposing soldiers is extremely played out, and not helped here by a few hasty twists that strain credibility, the writing is strong enough to lift the game above mawkishness. The protagonists are separated not just by nationality but by age. Kurt is a father, Harry a boy unconsciously in search of one. Kurt entertains few illusions about what war entails, while Harry perceives soldiering to be a glorious adventure.

Each has a tense relationship with people back home. As Kurt, you must choose how honest you want to be in letters to an infant daughter. Harry, similarly, must decide whether wooing his sweetheart with rousing shots of the troops is more important than capturing the war at its worst. Each character has a companion animal who serves as both puzzle prop and an outside perspective on the conflict's machinations and absurdities. As Kurt's cat, you dart between Allied and German positions while screams and gunshots erupt behind you. As Harry's pigeon, you witness the scale of the damage to the geography of France at a time when aerial photography was in its infancy.

If the worst part of war is the waiting, *11-11*'s writing is often strongest when it's lingering on the mirth, grief and boredom of soldiers before and after the bloodshed. There are scenes aboard troop trains, and football games in POW camps. Harry is treated to a sojourn at the Parisian cabarets, where the loudness of the laughter betrays the agony beneath, while Kurt spends a few days on his farm between tours of duty, slicing bread as he strains to rekindle a sense of home. As a fable about war, the game's most worthwhile quality is its naïve insistence that everybody you meet has some capacity for kindness, however warped by years of enmity. There are atrocities ahead but few expressions of hate, and many moments of generosity. Everybody is a victim of the whole, struggling for a toehold within a calamity that has taken on a life of its own.

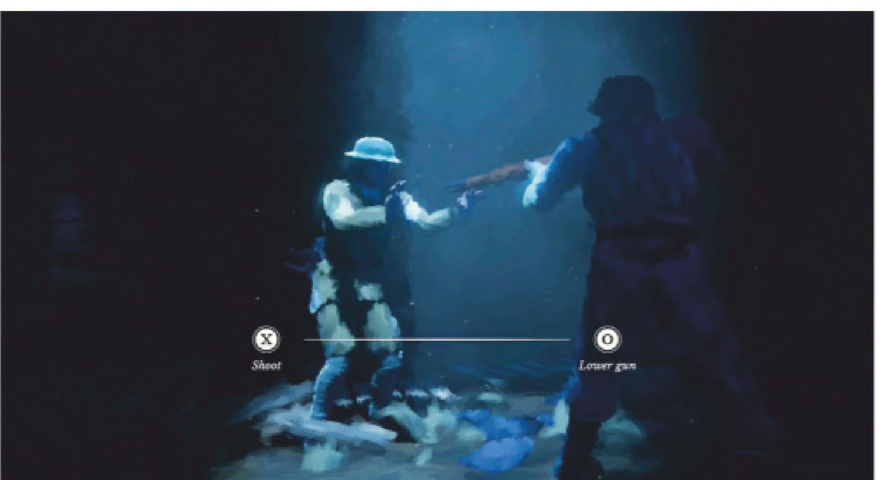
7



LEFT You'll experience battles from both sides, scurrying from crater to crater as Harry, then switching to Kurt's perspective as he races to fetch ammo for a machinegunner. BELOW The plot branches care of the odd life-or-death QTE, with a range of endings hanging in the balance, but this is otherwise a game that rewards you for taking your time with things. MAIN Elijah Wood and Sebastian Koch are superb as Harry and Kurt, backed up by a mournful, piano-led philharmonic soundtrack. Koch in particular beautifully conveys his character's stoical despair



ABOVE The game's non-player characters are somewhat reminiscent of JRPG villagers, with a couple of canned lines apiece. Talking to them as Kurt may give you ideas for what to write in your letters home





Déraciné

True, only the maddest of hatters could have dreamed up *Dark Souls*. But we can't help but feel that Hidetaka Miyazaki has taken a millinery obsession too far in *Déraciné*. We've lost count of the amount of bonnets and fedoras we've plucked from heads in this VR adventure. It's not the puzzles that stump us, despite their fuzzy logic – no, it's the hats, which regularly conceal crucial pointers. It's to FromSoftware's credit that we're willing to keep lifting *Déraciné*'s bewildering brims in pursuit of answers: this meditation on humanity's obsession with the past is one of the most sophisticated VR stories to date.

You play an invisible faerie who moves through different 'epochs' of time. The echoing halls of the grand Gothic house you roam are home to a genteel, glassy-eyed group of orphans. Soon you strike up an unlikely friendship, and the children are curiously likeable despite their uncanny expressions. Nils is the bookworm of the gang; excitable Rozsa sports ribbons in her hair and a mysterious bandage on her leg.

Narrative details are meted out in fragments: strange portents glimpsed in item descriptions, names scrawled on the backs of photographs or sighted in dusty library corners. Despite a slow first half, things fall into place beautifully in the second. It's exactly the sort of self-assembly fairytale we've come to expect from its creator – elegant, wistful, and in some cases terrifying.

The mechanics of piecing it all together, however, are unenjoyable. The majority of the game is spent using Move controllers to teleport to predetermined spots throughout the house, trying to figure out which objects are relevant to this particular epoch's puzzles. Playing a vague point-and-click-style puzzler in a huge mansion you must navigate step by step is as irritating as it sounds. Early on, the game introduces a mechanic for blocking off certain areas. Later, however, it's either not used enough, leaving you wandering useless hallways none the wiser – or worse, is undermined entirely.

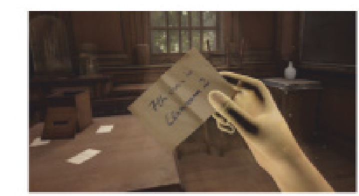
Most egregious of all is that *Déraciné* too often turns into a tedious game of hunt the sparkle, as you grope awkwardly around bodies to find the twinkle that triggers conversation audio. Early on, characters might only contain one sparkle, but later there'll inexplicably be multiple concealed about their person – most likely under their headwear. Miss one, and you'll find yourself at a loss for hours. This is an absolutely Miyazakian narrative deftly woven, with a particularly brilliant conclusion. Mechanically, however, it's pedestrian and woefully communicated. What a pity *Déraciné* doesn't have a little more finesse up its sleeve – or, indeed, under its hats.



6

A red ring of death of a different sort, the band on your right hand can drain time from living creatures to reanimate the dead. Narratively, the ring plays a crucial role, but as a mechanic it's used sparingly and unimaginatively

Developer FromSoftware, SIE Japan Studio
Publisher SIE
Format PSVR
Release Out now



HARD CASH
Déraciné's coin-hunting minigame is almost more absorbing than its mainline puzzles. Your task is to find eight coins hidden in the house and grounds. You're given a few clues to start you off: otherwise, it's up to you to make good use of your VR headset, peering into secret spaces before depositing the coins in a box. Curiously, there's no specific trophy for completing this challenge: indeed, you'll receive the easiest Platinum of your life simply by completing the main story.



Pokémon: Let's Go, Eevee & Pikachu

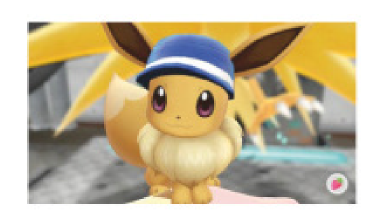
Alarm bells were ringing for *Pokémon: Let's Go* as soon as Game Freak pointedly explained a new mainline RPG would be out next year – in other words, don't expect a proper *Pokémon* this time round. The clamour grew louder when it was revealed it would borrow *Pokémon Go*'s capture mechanics, rather than have you battling wild Pokémon. Yet we suspect most will acclimatise more quickly than they'd dare admit; those easy encounters are hardly missed here, not least since you now gain experience from catching 'em all. It would be wrong to say this isn't for the fans, too, because a particular subset of *Pokémon* players will get a real kick out of it. Those who grew up playing *Red*, *Blue* or *Yellow* and now have kids of their own should find this the ideal way to introduce their offspring to their new favourite series.

Pokémon now roam visibly, letting you choose your capture opportunities. Lobbing a Poké Ball is a simple matter of flicking the Joy-Con forward, though mastering the technique is something of an arcane art. It's never fully clear why some throws miss the mark, though botched catches only add to the delighted relief when the clasp finally closes around your target. It's even better with the pleasantly weighty Poké Ball Plus peripheral, with which you can play the entire game. It wobbles, rumbles and lights up in time with the onscreen device, the Pokémon's cry sounding when they're safely tucked up inside. Like *Go*'s AR features, it brings the game's fiction into the real world in a way that's certain to fire the imagination of younger trainers. Just make sure the wrist strap's secured.

Shake another Joy-Con and another player can instantly drop in or out, controlling a second trainer of the opposite gender to assist in battles and with catching more elusive creatures. The satisfaction of landing a legendary beast with a perfectly synchronised throw is not to be underestimated, not least since you'll multiply the experience you earn – even if it turns the campaign into a procession. As a game ostensibly aimed at first-timers, it's surprisingly happy to let you get lost in its labyrinthine caves, circuitous routes and, yes, *that* Silph Co building. But trainers with good memories will be able to help a newcomer through: Kanto might look prettier, but by and large it hasn't changed much.

Its cooperative rather than competitive focus certainly won't be to all tastes, and though some streamlining is sensible – there's no need to trek to a Pokémon centre to switch up your party – it isn't one for the min-maxers and stat-tweakers. But as a first adventure for beginners, young or old, this gets a lot right. No alarms, then, but a fair few surprises. **7**

Developer Game Freak
Publisher Nintendo, The Pokémon Company
Format Switch
Release Out now



ALL ABOUT EEVEE
If the world feels a little static, its non-human inhabitants are anything but. A single Pokémon can be taken out of their ball to follow you around (some can be ridden) but it's to one of the titular partner Pokémon you're likely to grow most closely attached. You can feed and pet them in firstperson, and showering them with affection pays off: they'll shake off status effects and survive ordinarily fatal blows in battle, and even bring you the odd gift.

Your partner can learn techniques corresponding to the old HM moves, without intruding on their battle moveset. Later on you'll find a fellow who can teach them powerful attacks that each have ancillary effects



Gwent: The Witcher Card Game

Developer/publisher CD Projekt (Red)
Format PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

After a year-and-a-half in open beta, and two before that of simply being a minigame in sprawling RPG *The Witcher 3*, *Gwent* has finally hit 1.0. And, for once, that definitive version number is more than simply symbolic. The game has been transformed for release, both expanded and refined into something more visually arresting and mechanically fascinating than before.

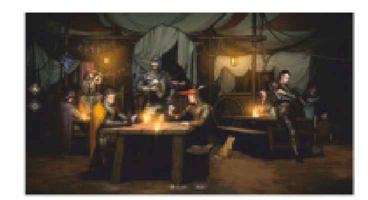
This is CD Projekt's bid for a slice of the free-to-play online card game market, but it bears little resemblance to its peers. A match is played over the best of three rounds, with the battlefield cleared at the end of each. Two players take turns to place cards, which bear numbers – you win by having the highest total at the end of the round. Though the cards represent warriors summoned for combat, they don't crash against each other as in *Hearthstone*. Instead of a skirmish, *Gwent* is a war, a sort of competitive mustering of forces, with each card's unique abilities aiding your efforts or disrupting your opponents' as you jostle for mathematical supremacy.

And, crucially, you're not *always* trying to win. Each player can afford to lose one round if it helps their goal of winning the other two, and here things get deliciously psychological. Is your foe actually committing their best, or are they holding something back for later, baiting you into wasting powerful cards on a battle they've already decided to concede? A dance of feints and bluffs ensues that combines the best moments of a tense evening of poker with the tactical depth of a strategy game.

A diverse spread of card abilities add much room for manoeuvring. Some soldiers, for example, become stronger over time – powerful plays if you know the opponent needs to commit to a long round, but damp squibs if they decide to concede early. Others only bear fruit later in the game, including a Phoenix whose utility comes in its ability to be reborn in subsequent rounds.

The price of this intricacy is that *Gwent* is anything but accessible. It's both complex, and not great at explaining and visually representing its complexity. It's not as arcane as, say, *Dota 2*, but it certainly demands your full attention and, unusually for the genre, includes very little randomness to even the playing field. Do your homework, however, and your reward is some of the year's most satisfying and exciting multiplayer. CD Projekt is fond of dubbing its games 'mature', though usually that's a question of themes, rather than complexity. But it really is the perfect word for *Gwent* – compared to its genre peers, it feels both remarkably grown-up, and finely aged by its years of open development.

8



BROKEN OFF
Thronebreaker: The Witcher Tales started life as a singleplayer mode for *Gwent*, but expanded enough in scope over the course of development that it ended up being spun out as its own standalone, paid release. Battles are represented with *Gwent* matches, but it's otherwise a fully-fledged top-down RPG, with a branching story comparable to those in the mainline *The Witcher* games. It's a fine companion piece, and unlocks new cards and cosmetic items in *Gwent* proper.



The card artwork is truly beautiful, especially the 'premium' animated versions – though an abundance of lithe, naked women feels like a throwback to the bad old days of *The Witcher*'s sexy pin-up cards

Arca's Path VR

Developer Dream Reality Interactive
Publisher Rebellion
Format PSVR (tested), Rift, Vive
Release Out now

Within six months, *Arca's Path* has gone from the most relaxing thing at E3 to the most stressful VR game we've played since *The Persistence*. Perhaps it was ever thus, and we'd been lulled into a false sense of tranquillity: its benign opening certainly suggests a different kind of game to the one it ends up as. You could call it a momentum-based 3D platformer, or an arthouse *Super Monkey Ball*. Using your head alone, you guide a not-quite-spherical polyhedron around angular environments. You'll look left and right to roll in that direction, nod your head to bring it towards you, and lift your chin to move into the screen. The closer your viewing reticle is to the ball, the slower it'll move; stare straight at it and it'll come to a complete standstill, even on steep ramps.

It's a fascinating world, at once alluring yet not exactly welcoming. There are no direct threats – at least not until much later – but the fear of falling is tangible, with VR making those long, barrier-free sections more vertiginous still. But as you bumble about in the early stages, it's a delight to behold: striking and wonderfully alien, with plants and flowers unfolding like stop-motion origami. You soon realise it's an elegant solution to pop-up, but it works when you're taking your time – albeit less so when you're moving at speed and objects suddenly appear from nowhere. But the ambience is ruined by bizarrely jittery sound design, all scratches, bleeps and squawks, with a high-pitched whine as you approach the end of a stage. Your avatar makes a sound like a revving engine: it's a constant irritant, and yet turning the spot effects off only results in an absence of feedback. The experimental score, meanwhile, is both repetitive and oddly unsettling, surely better suited to some kind of avant-garde horror game.

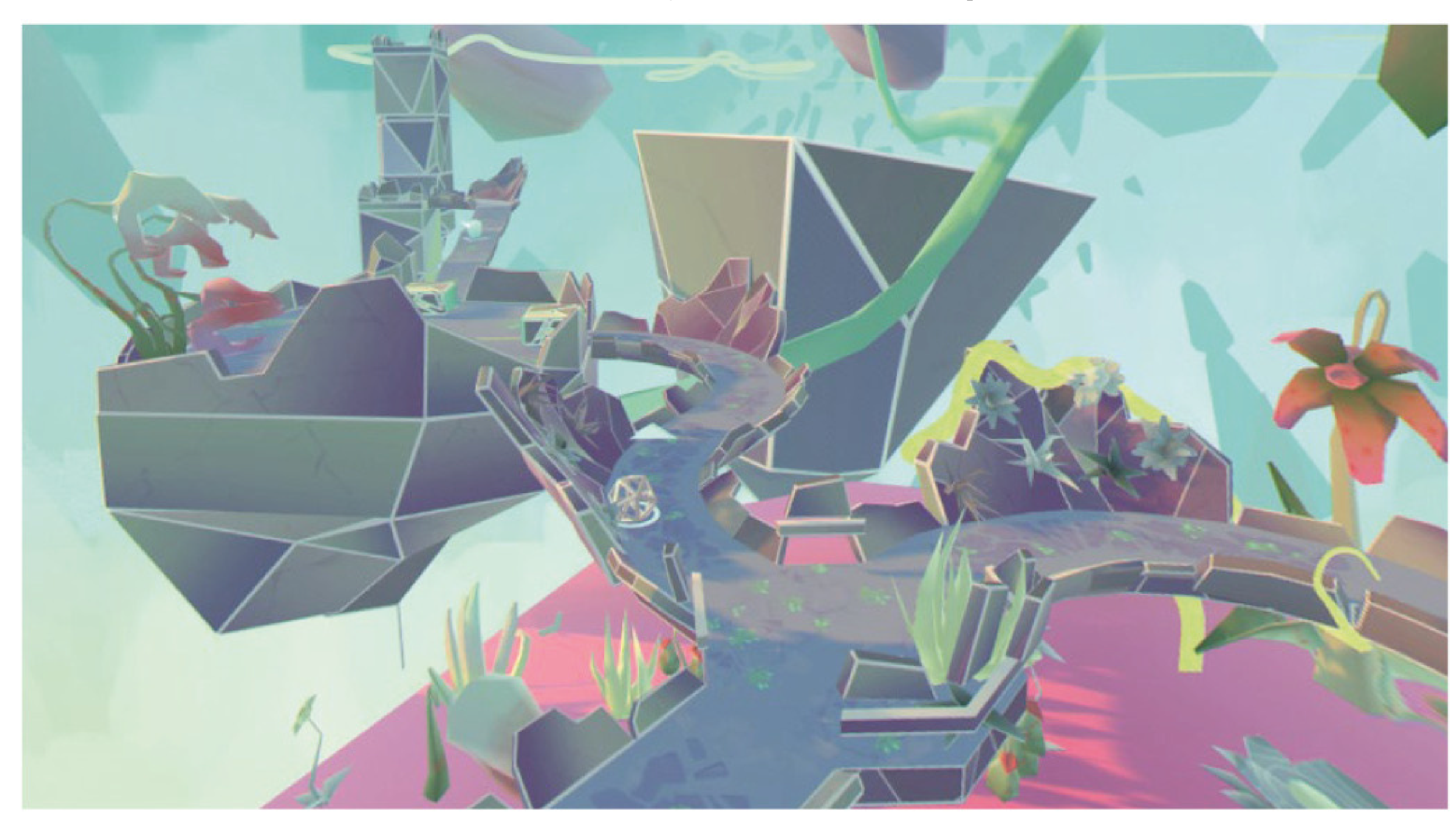
Occasionally, it gets your heart rate up in a good way: there are moments of nervy navigation down tricky paths, with tilting sections and cracked blocks that collapse if you're moving too fast. Elsewhere, it feels like a thrilling extreme sports sim, with long slopes and half-pipes to speed down, with precariously positioned crystals (snagging all of these unlocks a time trial mode for the current stage) teasing you towards the edges. But several challenges are disappointingly mundane, including clumsily nudging blocks to clear a path forward, and others are needlessly exacting. Then it leans on time-worn techniques to delay the end; checkpoints are fewer and further between, and there's a bit of forced stealth to pad out some otherwise relatively easy final stages. For a while, *Arca's Path* promises to be a new kind of VR game, but in the end its problems are all too familiar.





TRIAL AND ERROR
Some stages are well-suited to time trialling, but others are far too long, and several feature sections where you're forced to come to a standstill while you wait for a slow-moving platform to arrive. During sequences where you need to clear a succession of gaps, the only way to reach the speed you need to cross them – at least if you want to beat the demanding gold medal times – is to lift your chin so high that you can no longer see the ground.

In theory, this is one of the less physically demanding VR games. But the twitchy movement means you need to keep your head relatively still for long periods of time. After an hour or so we are left with a stiff neck



Black Bird

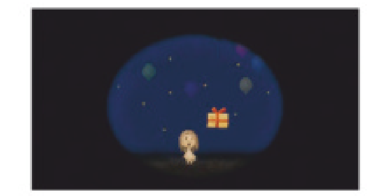
This is Onion Games' most normal game to date, though we suppose everything's relative. *Black Bird* is bonkers, certainly. But unlike its forebears *Dandy Dungeon* and *Million Onion Hotel*, it's quite happy working within the confines of its chosen genre, rather than madly subverting them. At its heart is a horizontally scrolling shooter whose greatest surprise comes not from the sort of stylistic non-sequitur that has become Yoshiro Kimura's hallmark. Rather, it is in how content it appears to be to stick to a formula.

Black Bird's central inspiration is the 1980s Sega shooter *Fantasy Zone*. You can turn your ship around, flying and firing left or right, and stages wrap around on themselves, meaning there's no such thing as running away, merely running towards another set of problems. Each stage is full of sporadically spawning waves of enemies, and five control towers; once the latter are destroyed, a boss battle begins. Do this four times and the credits roll, though naturally this is only the start.

Which is just as well, really, as what first appears to be the entirety of *Black Bird* is a slender package indeed, however refreshing it may be in this era of 100-hour epics to see the credits roll on a review game in 20 minutes. Your first clear unlocks True Mode, where

The abundance of level furniture, combined with detailed backgrounds and a devious colour palette, means the action can often be hard to parse. It's a particular problem in handheld mode, though younger eyes may fare better

Developer/publisher Onion Games
Format PC, Switch (tested)
Release Out now



DEAD OF NIGHT
In story terms, this is morbid stuff from a normally whimsically inclined developer. The game opens with a young girl collapsing in the street and dying. Passersby ignore the corpse completely; a passing gent pokes her with a stick, then moves on. Enraged, the girl's body is reborn as the titular crow, exacting revenge on those who had ignored her with big weird bullets. In between missions, cutscenes repurpose defeated bosses as the girl's toys, lending an even bleaker air to proceedings.

enemies are faster, more accurate and greater in number. There are secret characters to find, multiple endings to discover, and boss battles are tougher, their existing attack phases complicated and extra ones added.

It's tough stuff, all of a sudden, and made especially so by a meagre health bar and no continue system. Your health, however, can be topped up and even extended using power-ups found in jars that are hidden around the levels, that switch between health, speed-ups and extra smart bombs when you shoot them.

At first, when survivability is your main concern, you'll likely opt for health pick-ups when you smash open a jar. Indeed, this is important, since the titular avian grows in size along with health. But you'll also want to prioritise bombs. The climactic explosion produces a shower of green gems, which are the game's most vital resource, dropped by every enemy you kill. Collect enough of these, and your rate of fire increases, your bullets getting larger in tandem.

And it is here the game's real genius reveals itself. Gems get smaller the longer you leave them in play, so to maximise their value, and increase your power level efficiently, you need to pick them up as soon as they appear. That mandates an aggressive style of play that, in True Mode at least, is risky in the extreme. This may be Onion Games' most conventional release to date, but still Kimura finds a way to bend the rules.

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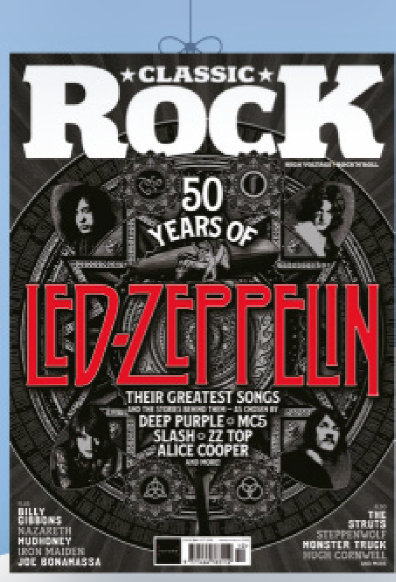


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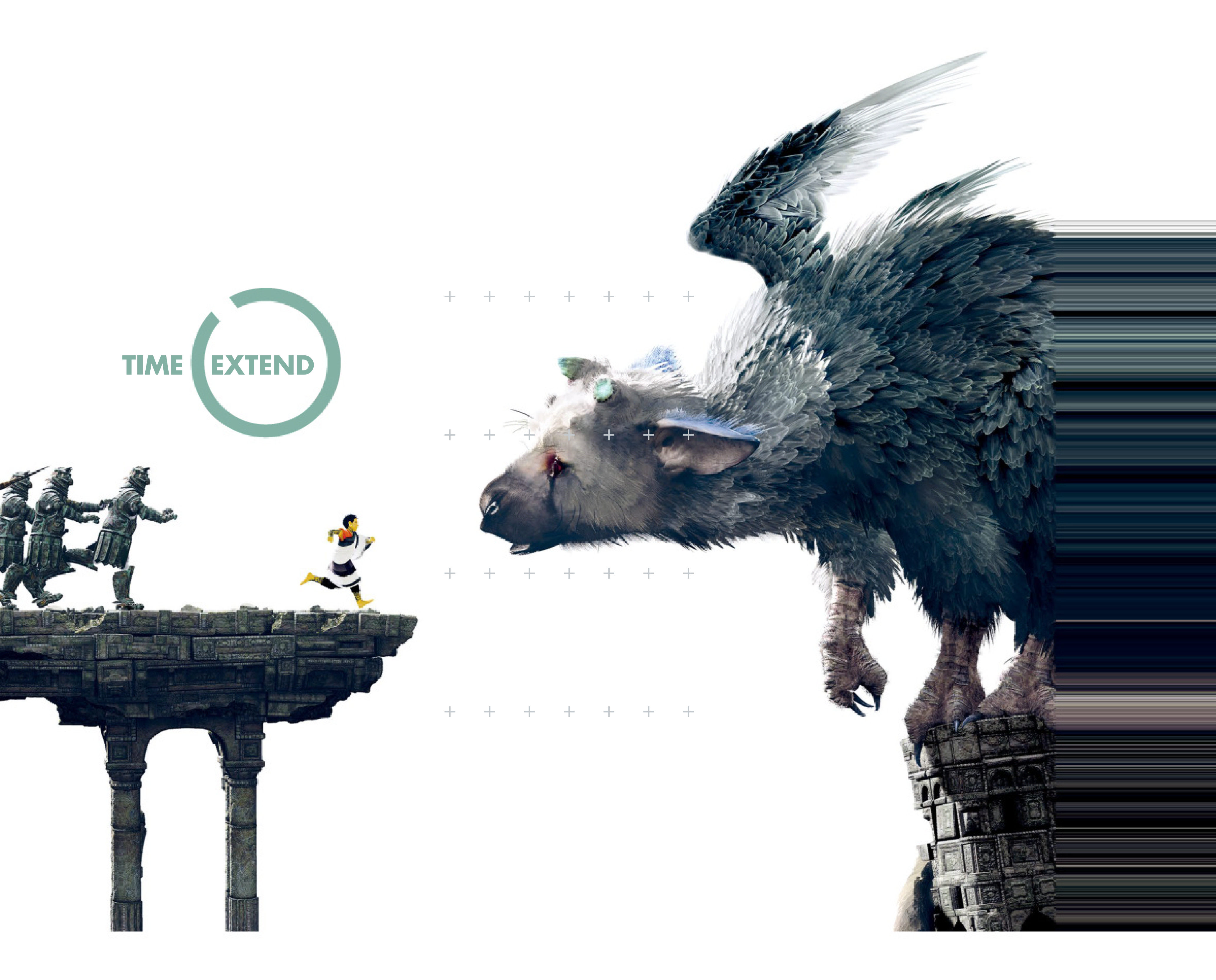
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The Last Guardian

The acts of resistance that make Ueda's long-awaited fable his best – and most divisive – game to date

BY CHRIS SCHILLING

Developer GenDesign, Japan Studio **Publisher** SIE **Format** PS4 **Release** 2016

You're going to have to be patient. And you can't say Fumito Ueda doesn't give you fair warning. Not long into *The Last Guardian*, the titular chimera Trico gently snuffles at the player character, a young boy, nudging him awake with his beaky nose. It sounds like a heartwarming scene, but by then it's already knocked him out twice. The first time, it bucks and thrashes wildly as you try to remove a spear from near its back legs, booting you into a wall. Then, as you tug another from by its shoulder, it shrieks and throws you violently to the ground. It may already have swatted you aside with its huge claws if you got too close while trying to feed it a barrel of glowing blue goop to get its strength up. You expected a saccharine-sweet fable about a boy and his adorable animal friend? Guess again. This is one relationship you need to work at.

Whatever you think about the game surrounding it, it's almost impossible not to marvel at Trico, a staggering feat of technical engineering, AI, animation, sound design and good old-fashioned graphical heft. Within Trico, you'll see elements of all the creatures depicted in the game's illustrated intro. The affectionate nuzzles are those of a dog; the way it wiggles its backside before it jumps is pure cat; his tiny, broken wings belong to an injured fledgling. Indeed, when you first meet Trico he reacts like an abused pet: his nervous growls as you tentatively approach him speak to a history of violent treatment at the hands of an unseen master.

And so, when you later pull spears embedded in its limbs and flanks, you wince. Partly because you've been trained to anticipate Trico instantly lashing out when they come free, but mostly because it's genuinely harrowing to see and hear him in pain. Somehow, you'll try to do this in such a way as to make it gentler for him, applying enough force to drag it free but not so much that it hurts. And then, unless you're completely heartless, you'll instinctively find yourself stroking Trico afterwards to pacify him.

All of this is necessary to establish a connection between the two, as they steadily come to rely on one another to make their escape. *The Last Guardian* is, essentially, a jailbreak with the most powerful cellmate you could possibly wish for. And like most prisons, this isn't a place built to accommodate either of you comfortably. There are tiny crawlspaces, low-ceilinged rooms and narrow cracks that only the boy can squeeze through. Elsewhere there are gaps that are too far to jump, ledges that are far too high to reach, obstacles that only Trico can destroy (the fierce and untamed bolts of lightning that fly from his tail are, again, anything but cute). As such, the two have no choice but to learn to work together to get by.

For a while that makes for a decidedly unconventional kind of action-adventure, where exploration is punctuated by the need to effectively train an obstinate pet. Trico is large and inherently slow, and one of the great joys of the game – and one of its great frustrations for some – is watching it gradually manoeuvre itself into position to do your bidding. Sometimes this involves it ignoring you for a little while, or doing the wrong thing entirely. Occasionally it seems distracted or simply disinterested. But over time, given clear and consistent instruction, you'll find Trico responds more predictably. You learn how to read its body language to gauge whether he's understood what's being asked of it. And though on occasion the puzzles do seem a little obtuse – at one stage you need to command Trico to jump to get it to dive underwater, a technique that is never explained – sticking points grow steadily rarer.

You'll even begin to experience pangs of separation anxiety. The moments when you're forced to leave Trico behind, however briefly, become a wrench, much as they did in *Ico* with Yorda. It's a selfish concern, in some ways: you're worried that your friend might not be safe on its own, true, but also that you might be in peril without it. And the boy is particularly vulnerable here. Armoured guards lunge for you, like *Ico*'s shadowy enemies, attempting to drag you away to some unknown fate. You can briefly stall them by throwing barrels and the like, but it's so much easier to deal with them when Trico's around. He's capable of skittling several enemies with a single ▶

pounce, batting away the stragglers like a cat toying with a ball of yarn – and in these cathartic rescues you'll feel an even stronger connection to it.

Theirs is a bond forged through adversity, then, and it's a struggle the player gets to really *feel*. This is a game of persistent little frictions where progression doesn't feel as smoothly moderated as many modern games. Yet that's typical of Ueda's work. *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus* also play the long game, finding ways to discomfit you without putting you off entirely. Like *The Last Guardian*, they feature a degree of baked-in inconvenience. Think of the controller rumble where you physically feel the tug of Yorda's hand, slowing you down. Think of Argo refusing to turn or suddenly veering off to one side, forcing you to course-correct, to pull tight on the reins – and how, over time, he comes to trust you and stops resisting, and your relationship is all the more meaningful for it. Ueda's games have historically pushed back rather than yielding, reminding the players that there are forces beyond their control. You are not the centre of the universe. There is always something or someone to keep you humble.

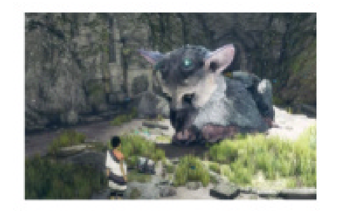
With all that in mind, the divisive reaction that greeted *The Last Guardian* was, in some ways, surprising. In hindsight, a degree of disappointment was inevitable: nine years in development meant nine years during which anticipation reached a level to which no game could ever hope to live up. More significantly, it meant nine years of player expectations having been recalibrated by an entire console generation: in some respects, *The Last Guardian* still felt like a product of the PS2 era, where creative experimentation and jagged edges were more enthusiastically welcomed. Since *Colossus*, open-world power fantasies have become the blockbuster norm: we have collectively grown accustomed to games giving us everything we want. We're so used to being catered to, so used to being in control, that the idea of having to really work for something – or certainly the idea of relying on someone or something else to get by – has become anathema.

Its problems shouldn't be ignored, though many of these have been exaggerated, and in some cases simply misunderstood. The much-derided camera is certainly no worse than *Shadow Of The Colossus*: sure, it occasionally has trouble navigating some of its more cramped interiors, but show us a thirdperson game that doesn't. The boy's skittish movement, too, was a bone of contention, dismissed in some quarters as technical sloppiness. Yet it would surely have been straightforward enough to make him slower, to let him turn on a dime – particularly once Mark Cerny and his technical crew had been parachuted in to help get the game out the door. Which only goes to prove that it's there for a reason. The boy's unruly momentum is

MANY OF THE GAME'S PROBLEMS HAVE BEEN EXAGGERATED, AND IN SOME CASES SIMPLY MISUNDERSTOOD



Traversal is no more perilous than, say, *Uncharted*, but whether it's the boy's vulnerability or the way the camera is positioned to emphasise the drop, such forays *feel* dangerous



The barrels represent a sign of progress. At first you need to position them just so for Trico to eat them. By the final third, he'll catch them in his mouth when you throw them his way



ANIMAL MAGIC

It's no accident that the first image you see after *The Last Guardian*'s short prologue is a single feather and a set of thick chains: a juxtaposition of fragility with immense power. It's telling, too, that during the game's masterful opening credit sequence, Takeshi Furukawa's sumptuous score shifts to a low, ominous piano note and rolling timpani when the camera alights on an illustration of Trico. Clearly, this is a beast to be admired, but not to be underestimated. Before that, we see black-and-white drawings of real-world animals before a shift to otherworldly creatures, such as unicorns and gryphons. This tells us exactly what Trico is: something fantastical, but informed by nature. Everything that comes afterward only serves to bear that out.



Takeshi Furukawa's BAFTA-nominated score reaches a triumphant, goosebump-inducing crescendo in the cue Finale: Escape II. In the game, however, it unexpectedly cuts out as Trico finally takes flight. All we hear is the sound of the wind and the beast's wings: we've escaped, yes, but this is no great victory

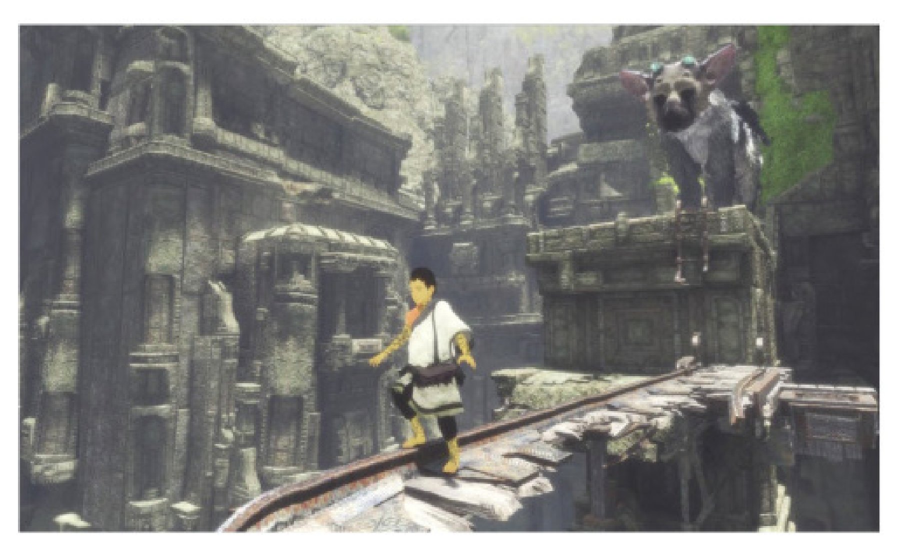
exactly what you'd expect of a young child, where their legs can seem to move faster than their brain. It's an expressive kind of run, one that communicates the giddy excitement of youth – and, yes, offers a distinct contrast to the slow, lumbering Trico, amplifying that odd-couple dynamic.

Ultimately, those unorthodox design choices – and the player's own perseverance – pay off. That first leap of faith, where you plunge in the hope that Trico will catch you in his mouth or with his tail, is all the more thrilling because of the difficulties you've endured in gaining his trust. Each of these little breakthroughs in communication feels like a revelation, none more profound than the moment Trico overcomes his fear and intervenes to save the boy. As guards threaten to drag him away, the beast smashes through the stained-glass eyes that, until now, have had it whimpering and cowering in terror – reminders, no doubt, of past abuses. It's clearly a scripted beat, but since it occurs in-engine, it feels organic – and the accompanying surge of honest-to-goodness euphoria will make you cheer or have you wiping away a tear. Perhaps both.

You'll feel a similar sensation during the game's climactic climb. By this stage, Trico should move almost without prompting, leaping from tower to tower without the traditional point and shout. What at first glance would seem to be an arduous process is practically automated – albeit informed by every interaction you've had with Trico beforehand. It's the perfect expression of how your relationship has changed throughout your journey: those rough edges have been sanded down, and progress finally feels smooth.

Then, of course, comes one final act of resistance, one final push back from Ueda. As angry men from the boy's village point their spears at the injured beast, suddenly the roles have been heartbreakingly switched: now *you're* the one being asked to do something you'd rather not. For once, it's time for the boy to save Trico – though he can only do so by pushing it away, a deliberate reversal of those opening scenes. In that moment you realise just how much you've grown to care for the big lummox. Yes, you have to be patient – but here, at the very end, you get the richest of emotional rewards in return. ■

The Last Guardian may be most affecting in its quieter moments, but Ueda still knows how to craft a set-piece. This collapsing-bridge sequence is a highlight



A progress report on the games we just can't quit



Stellaris

Developer/publisher Paradox Interactive **Format** PC **Release** 2016

Two years ago, Paradox's internal studio took its first (and, so far, only) step out of real-world history, and into a rather wider universe. When *Stellaris* launched, it was enthralling, but it also felt less a finished product and more a foundation upon which to build. Sure enough, it's followed in the footsteps of its older brother *Crusader Kings II*, enjoying such a regular stream of updates and DLC that it's essentially mutating into its own sequel.

It's clear the developer holds no one part of its tangle of systems sacred. Warfare, FTL travel, politics and more have all been totally overhauled, and the game's all the better for it. Alongside this gradual rebuilding of the game's core has come a spread of paid expansions, adding everything from Death Star-like superstructures to swarming hive minds.

While this path would see some titles succumb to bloat and over-complexity, *Stellaris* thrives in every new layer of variety or detail. To call it a strategy game is almost misleading – it shares as much DNA with tabletop role-playing games as it does the average 4X, using its systems to guide the player's imagination. It's a sandbox for generating stories, and as such it benefits from being littered with toys.

The new MegaCorp expansion is thus another welcome addition. It allows you to run your empire as a galaxy-spanning business venture, complete with regional branches on other species' planets. You can even opt to operate as a mafia family, sowing crime in enemy empires and reaping the rewards; or, brilliantly, a space-borne mega-church in the mould of American TV fundamentalists.

Oddly, the biggest downside of this font of fresh releases is that there's never a right time to start a new save. Should you play now, or wait until the next DLC? Or a few weeks after that, when the inevitable balance changes and bug fixes arrive? But by then, the next stop on the roadmap will have been announced, tempting you to stall another month or two. If you're the sort to proudly announce, on the advent of any game's release, that you'll be waiting for the GOTY edition, you'll find yourself paralysed.

And if *Crusader Kings II* is any guide, then this is only the beginning. After six years, Paradox's original darling is *still* trundling on, its latest expansion arriving in November. With that game, however, its added content has always been at least somewhat predictable, bound as it is by real-world nations and events. *Stellaris'* future carries a wider potential. With nearly the complete spectrum of science-fiction to serve as inspiration, the sky – and 1,000 procedurally generated stars within it – is the limit. ■

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